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The impact of sport on the UK 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 UK 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 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.

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Introduction

There is a tangible air of World Cup anticipation. England fans in particular, while hoping for glory, are undoubtedly preparing for what could be a potentially torturous ride, if recent performances are anything to go by. The injury to Wayne Rooney has done little to alleviate these anxieties. In the words of one great football pundit “it’s like déjà-vu all over again”. If the team does well, up and down the country there will be scenes of celebration. Conversely, defeat, sub-standard performances or an early departure from the competition are likely to shroud large sections of the population in collective grief.

While some of the most ardent football fans have already booked time off to follow the tournament, the majority of us will attempt to carry on as usual, in the hope that our places of work may be a little more flexible than normal.

A substantial amount of psychological literature exists linking sporting success and fan self-esteem, and also self-esteem with productivity. Posten¹ (1998) suggests that sport can increase self-esteem by association and affiliation. By wearing the team colours, watching every game, knowing the players’ names and positions, followers begin to feel an integral part of the team. Consequently, when a team does well, fans feel high self-esteem related to their team’s victory.

Real-life accounts reveal that the sporting ‘feel good’ factor has a significant impact on the world of work: on individuals’ motivation, approach to tasks and relationships with colleagues. ‘Talking sport’ is a way of breaking down barriers between colleagues, customers and suppliers. Often, it can make or break a sale or the relationship between a manager and his/her team. Sporting conversations are regularly used by individuals as a way of demolishing social barriers in the workplace and as an in-road to the establishment of more productive working relationships. Sport enhances creativity and promotes sharing of ideas. And yet, while the use of sporting knowledge is largely used as an ‘unofficial’ way of developing contacts and relationships, could management techniques encouraging this approach be of tangible business benefit?

¹ Posten M (1998) Social Identity Theory: Sports Affiliation and Self-Esteem. Living in a Social World, Psy 324: *Advanced Social Psychology*



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What systems should businesses put in place to ensure that the World Cup does not have an adverse effect on attendance at work, productivity and mood? Can businesses harness the ‘feel good’ factor that is produced by sport on an ongoing basis? How can businesses capitalise on the collective euphoria following sporting triumph and prolong sporting fervour for more than a few hours? What role does sport play day in, day out in the sales process, across hierarchies in the workplace, between men and women? How can managers consciously use sport to boost morale in the workplace? Can they learn from any particular aspects of sport and sports management? This study will examine the impact of ‘talking sport’ on the workplace and how employers can maximise and harness the positive effects produced.



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Methodology and sample

The focus of this report, commissioned by professional services recruitment consultancy, Hudson, and conducted by The Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC), is to assess some of the social and economic implications of sporting success and failure. The study began with some detailed qualitative research exploring perceptions of the role of sport in the workplace through focus groups and one-on-one interviews. The research focused on our fascination with sport, and the ways in which sports conversations and sports knowledge are used as a way of developing networks and affinities. What businesses could do to effectively manage the workplace during big sporting events, and what lessons they might take from sports such as management practice, team ethos, dedication, commitment, and encouraging individual flair, were also explored.

The focus groups were conducted by SIRC, with half comprising entirely of business managers. The follow-up interviews consisted of a broader, representative cross-section. The qualitative material was then used to inform the design of questions for a national poll. SIRC commissioned YouGov to administer questions in a representative poll of 2,000 people aged 18 to 70. The following analysis blends the findings of both the qualitative and quantitative research.

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Impact of sport on the workplace

Over one third of the poll respondents work in an environment which employs 1000 or more full time employees. A quarter of the respondents work in companies employing between 2-50 full time staff. The focus group respondents described their various working environments. The following quotes provide an indication of these.

“I work in a personal team of about twelve people. We’ve been together for a long time, just over two years. It’s very relaxed, very informal, there’s a lot of banter, sport or anything really, so it’s not a bad place to work.”

“We try not to have people tied down to their desks, especially the sales people. The more active they seem to be the more productive they seem to be. If they’re just sitting at their desks and on the phones then they don’t seem to achieve as much as when they’re having a little bit of, you know, atmosphere buoyed up by exuberance and energy and stuff like that.”

“I’m in telecoms sales so I’m invariably with people I’ve known for years and there’s always a lot of banter. It’s a really relaxed atmosphere to work in, very friendly, very chilled out. I guess it’s predominantly football that we talk about.”

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2006 World Cup

With the football World Cup around the corner, Hudson questioned participants on their attitudes towards this and other large sporting events and the role they play in working life. The football World Cup captures the passion and imagination of the nation, even among those who ordinarily profess no interest in football. It is an event that encourages social inclusion and grabs people's attention.

"I think different events grab people with different amounts of verve, so the World Cup is always a big office thing."

"I like football and I watch a lot of football and I watch a lot of international football. The Premiership's great but what I think really brings it out in most people is the World Cup, isn't it?"

"Most people participate to some extent or at least pretend they do. I think they genuinely do actually. There's a girl in my office who doesn't like football at all, but she really wants to go and watch the World Cup, she really does."

"When we're all together, it's team building - it's passionate and you know it's fantastic."

The majority of respondents polled said the World Cup this summer will have an effect on their working environment. Of the respondents resident in England, 70% of men and 62% of women said that it will have an impact at work. Of these, 62% of men and 52% of women suggest that it will boost morale if the team does well. Over a third of men and women also believe it will help to create team spirit at work. In Scotland 38% of respondents said that the World Cup would affect their working environment, despite the fact that Scotland is not fielding a team.

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Women tend to be more optimistic about the effects of a poor performance by the England team; 13% of women and 11% of men believe the event itself will boost morale even if the team does badly. A tenth of women and 6% of men think the World Cup will still help employees to bond even if England does badly. More men than women believe a bad result will reduce morale at work, with a quarter of men and 12% of women stating this to be the case.

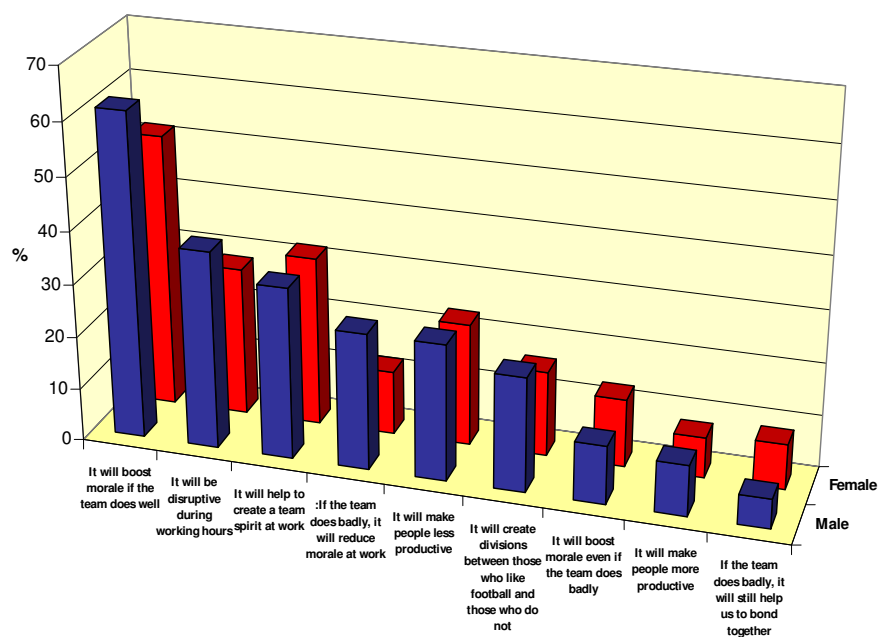
“For the World Cup in 2002, it was in Japan and it was early morning so what we did was we got everybody together and we actually watched all the games in branch. In terms of morale and team spirit and all the rest, it was excellent. It worked really, really well.”

“Well, when we were winning it was very good. I think it was more the fact that people were coming together, so even the ones that weren’t really into sport participated because of the kind of team effect. It’s a case of everyone else is making an effort so I’ll make an effort, and come in. It was very powerful in terms of how people felt.”

“It brings in the people who don’t necessarily follow sport all the time and I think it just gives a certain ‘well-being,’ as long as there’s reasonable results. Even if it’s a tournament where you get knocked out in the semis or quarters or something like that, it’s good.”

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Fig. 1 How do you think the football World Cup this summer will affect your working environment? [Please tick all that apply]



The influence of the World Cup on the workplace is not, however, always regarded positively. However, it is interesting that more men than women see the event as disruptive: 38% versus 28%. The following quotes are typical responses from the focus group respondents:

"Occasionally, like in the last Test match, the last day of the last test match we never got any work done to be honest and we all left early in the end. We just couldn't concentrate."

"You can't do anything that takes a long period of time because you might miss an update, so you're not really focused on what you're doing."

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"I think it has an impact when you leave a little bit earlier to watch the cricket. You just don't make the time up, to be honest."

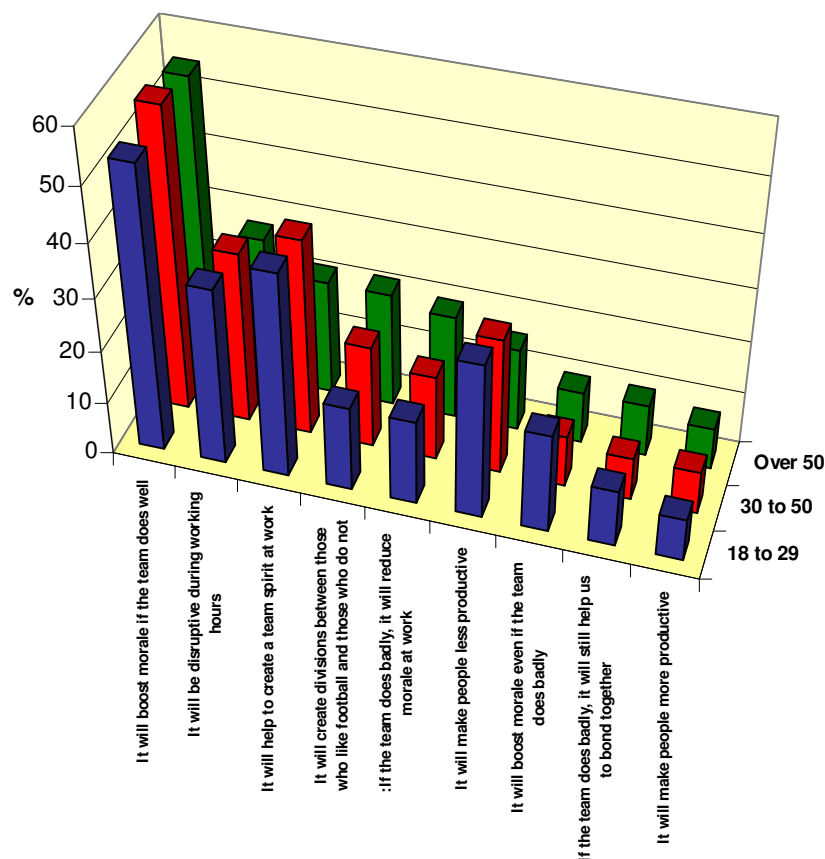
"It's just a big distraction isn't it? If you enjoy your job then you're ok. If you really don't, then you want any excuse not to do your work."

The age trend reveals that the younger the respondents, the more likely they are to believe that the World Cup will have an effect on the working environment. Three quarters of the 18 to 29 year olds, 62% of the 30 to 50 year olds and half of the over 50s stated this to be the case. The proportion of their responses is indicated in Figure 2.

All age groups agree that the event will boost morale if the team does well, with just over half of all the age groups stating this to be the case. However, more of the over 50s think it will have an adverse effect on morale if the team does badly. Fewer of the over 50s believe that it will help to create a team spirit at work: 22% compared to approximately 40% of the younger age groups.

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Fig.2 How do you think the football World Cup this summer will affect your working environment? [Please tick all that apply]



So what should businesses do? Accept the fact that the World Cup may negatively impact on the working environment or attempt to harness the enthusiasm and excitement that such competitions can evoke? Businesses should be aware that the World Cup can bring major benefits to the workplace if a proper approach is taken.

They need to anticipate the potentially negative impacts of the World Cup on the working environment and have measures in place to avoid them, while also reaping the benefits of higher morale and team spirit.



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Investors in People, prior to Euro 2004, urged businesses to be proactive in their approach to sporting events. By putting systems in place to allow flexible working arrangements, relaxing rules on radios and internet access and providing communal facilities such as TV screens, businesses might be able to avoid, or at least reduce, falls in productivity. Almost a quarter of respondents who believe that workplace morale and productivity can be boosted by sport suggest that staff should be encouraged to watch sport together.

Businesses do need to be mindful of the potential barriers that sporting events might impose within the workplace. More than one tenth (12%) of all working respondents believe that the forthcoming World Cup will create divisions in the workplace between those interested in football and those that are not.

Organised responses to the World Cup this summer should be inclusive and aim to tap into the aspects of collective responsibility, team orientation and commitment cited as being the most valuable lessons that business can learn from sport.

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Sporting and business success

The overwhelming perception that an England success will boost workplace morale is not just a World Cup wonder. Across Britain, half of women and 63% of men said that sporting success (i.e. their team winning) has an impact on their approach to work. Of those that felt this way, the proportion of their responses is indicated in Figure 3.

Encouragingly for employers, almost half of women (47%) and 40% of men said that sporting success lifts their mood and makes them more productive. A fifth of men said it increases their motivation at work, compared to 12% of women. Only 3% said that sporting success is distracting and makes them less productive, contrary to other surveys which have claimed that sport blights productivity.

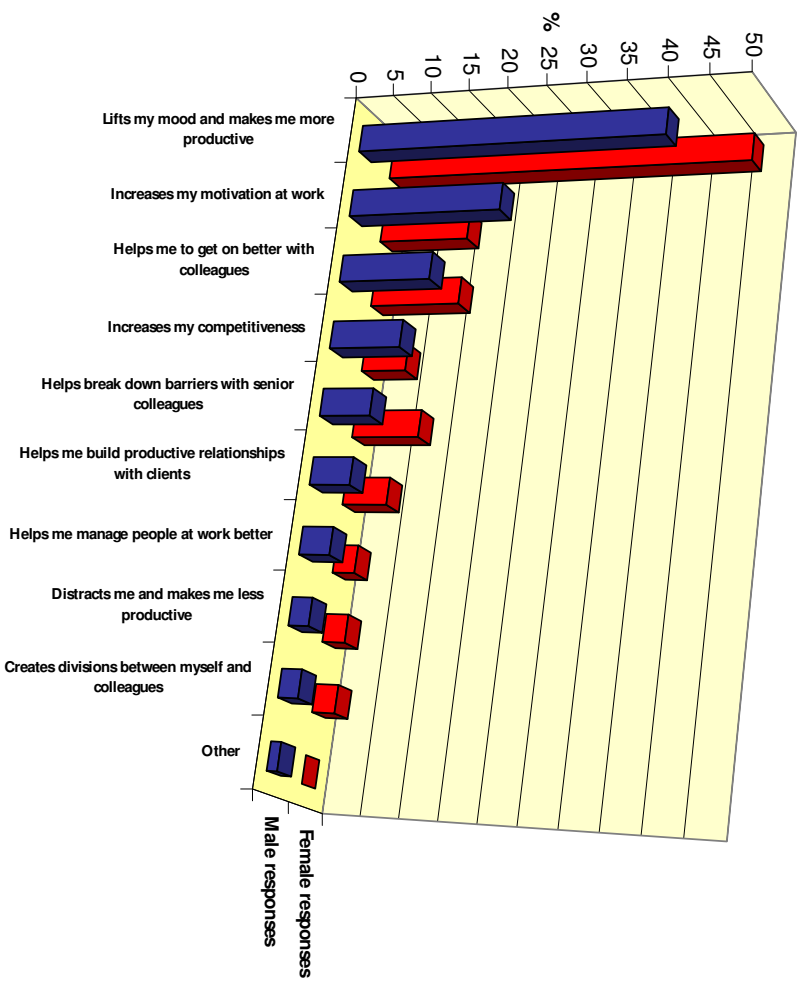
Sporting success also impacts on working relationships. One in ten men and women said that it helps them to get on better with colleagues and for 9% of women it helps to break down barriers with senior colleagues. Respondents said that sporting success helps to build productive relationships with clients.

"I think that when there's something like a Euro event or the World Cup or the rugby going on, then sales tend to do a little bit better because there's this common ground when you're talking to your customers. You can bridge a gap in an awkward moment when you're trying to establish some rapport, you know?"

"It has a positive effect across the team and, from a sales point of view, you can look at the figures and say these guys are actually performing a little bit better. They're a little bit out of their shell and they're getting into more of a comfort zone."

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Fig.3 (All who work and have an interest in sport by sex) Does a sporting success (e.g. the team you support winning) impact your approach to work in any of the following ways? [Please tick all that apply]





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In a hospitality and leisure environment, talking sport and sporting outcomes are perceived to be a good mood setter.

“The atmosphere it creates is very interesting because it can set the mood for the weekend and tell you what the working week is going to be like.”

“There are little pockets of boys that always talk about sport. I don’t ever really listen to what they’re talking about, but I know from the mood whether they’ve won or lost. The next day they’re definitely happier.”

“It brings people together, they’ve all got something in common and it opens up interaction.”

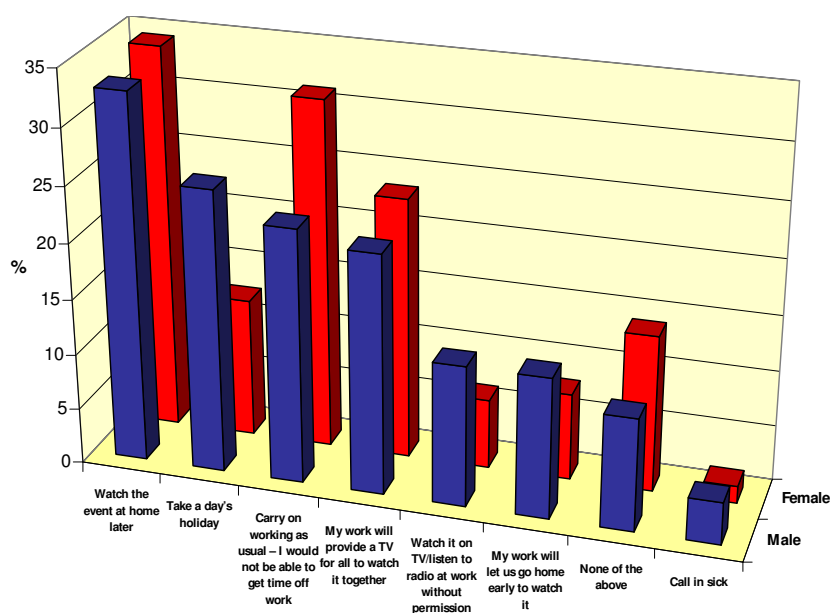
Interestingly, of those who say that sporting success has no impact on their approach to work, 20% describe themselves as being passionate about sport. Among this group, it seems that there is the potential for employers to harness this passion within the workplace to lift mood and increase productivity and motivation.

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Workplace and sport – conflicting schedules

The poll respondents were asked to select the course of action they would take if a sporting event coincided with working hours. Of those professing to have an interest in sport, the proportion of their responses is indicated in Figure 4 and Figure 5.

Fig.4 If there was a major sporting event taking place during work hours, what would you do? [Please tick all that apply]



The greatest likelihood of disruption will arise from a desire to watch matches. One quarter of the male respondents and 13% of women stated they would take a day's holiday if a major sporting event occurred during working hours. 13% of men and 6% of women said they would watch/listen to it at work without permission. Only 4% of men and 3% of women said they would call in sick, which will appease those employers concerned about absenteeism in the coming weeks.

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Among those respondents professing to have an interest in sport, English respondents were almost twice as likely (23%) as their Scottish counterparts (12%) to say that their work would provide a TV to watch a major sporting event. However, both figures are low, suggesting employers are missing a trick and failing to capitalize upon the significant benefits derived from collective euphoria around set-piece events. Employers who stick too rigidly to the view that employees are paid to work during work hours will engender resentment and diminish loyalty.

"I haven't taken a sickie, but I've brought a telly into work secretly. I was working the weekend and it was one of those five day cricket matches. I had a little digi-box plugged in, had an aerial and watched the cricket while I worked, just turned it down when the phone rang."

However, some employers do want to minimise the disruption of sporting events by providing TV screens for their employees:

"I think it's generally said that without a television you have to go off to the pub. Certainly in our office when people are going off to watch a sporting event, they kind of get a bit giddy that afternoon, like people do before they go on holiday. You see them bumbling around the office not doing very much."

"The last time the World Cup was on it was in Japan and the times were all skewed. They realised that people would be booking time off in blocks and that everybody would be under-resourced, so they put a screen up in the canteen."

"The staff coffee room had a television during major sporting events like the Wimbledon final or cricket. People would just go along and watch a bit whenever they had a few minutes. There would be times when everybody would be in the coffee room. It was very exciting, it was like a team spirit and people were cheering."

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A TV in the workplace is perceived by many employees and employers to be an effective means of reducing the likelihood of people taking 'sickies'.

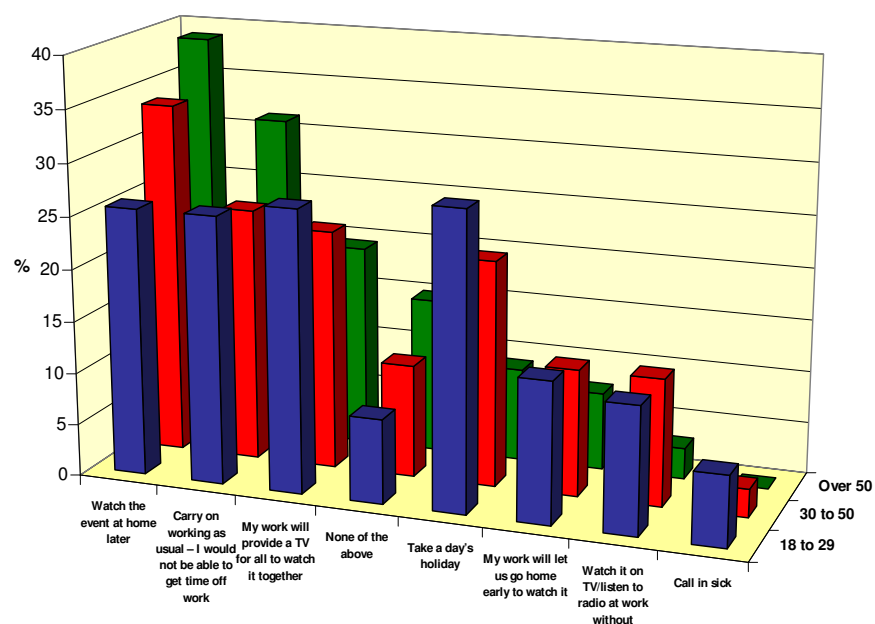
"If you don't bring a TV in and give them the opportunity [to watch a match] at work, then they're gonna take a sickie."

"I think they felt good that actually they weren't gonna miss the game, they didn't have to take a day off or didn't have to try and skive or something like that. We had some fun so I think it was very powerful. We did that for the rugby World Cup as well."

"If you've got a lot of staff, I think it's a great plan. I think that you will probably find that more people will be inclined to come to work as opposed to skiving off. Nobody in this room has admitted to doing it, but I've done it once or twice."

A third of men and women said they would watch the event at home after work.

Fig. 5 If there was a major sporting event taking place during work hours, what would you do? [Please tick all that apply]



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Viewing the responses by age breakdown shows that the over 50s are less likely to be disrupted by a major sporting event, with 39% saying they would watch the event at home later and 31% stating that they would carry on working as usual. Work productivity is most likely to be affected amongst the 18 to 29 year olds, with 28% stating they would take a day's holiday and 27% saying they would watch it on a TV provided by their employer. The younger age group are also more likely to call in sick, with 7% stating this to be their course of action, compared to 3% of the 30 to 50 year olds and none of the over 50s.

Clearly, managers would have a welcome audience and participants were they to incorporate sport more regularly into the workplace. Hudson's recommendations on how to consciously harness sport are included in the conclusions, and examples of companies who make effective use of sport are at the end of the report.



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The role of sport talk

Clearly, managers would have a welcome audience and participants were they to incorporate sport more regularly into the workplace. Hudson's recommendations on how to consciously harness sport are included in the conclusions, and examples of companies who make effective use of sport are at the end of the report.

The results reveal that sporting success can have a positive impact on boosting morale, improving mood and productivity. Major sporting events such as the football World Cup can also impact on team spirit at work, providing an environment for social inclusion rather than exclusion. For the passionate followers of sport, however, talking sport at work fulfils a host of functions, not least improving communication among team members, breaking down hierarchical boundaries and improving customer relations. The following findings demonstrate the role of day-to-day sporting conversation in the office and how the 'feel good' factor that arises from sporting success can be harnessed.

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Attitudes towards sport

Perhaps unsurprisingly, men are more interested in sport, with 46% stating that they are passionate or keen sports fans, compared to 14% of women. However, almost 40% of women say they have some interest. 31% have very little interest in sport (Figure 6).

Fig. 6 (All who work - by sex) Which of the following best describes your attitude towards sport?

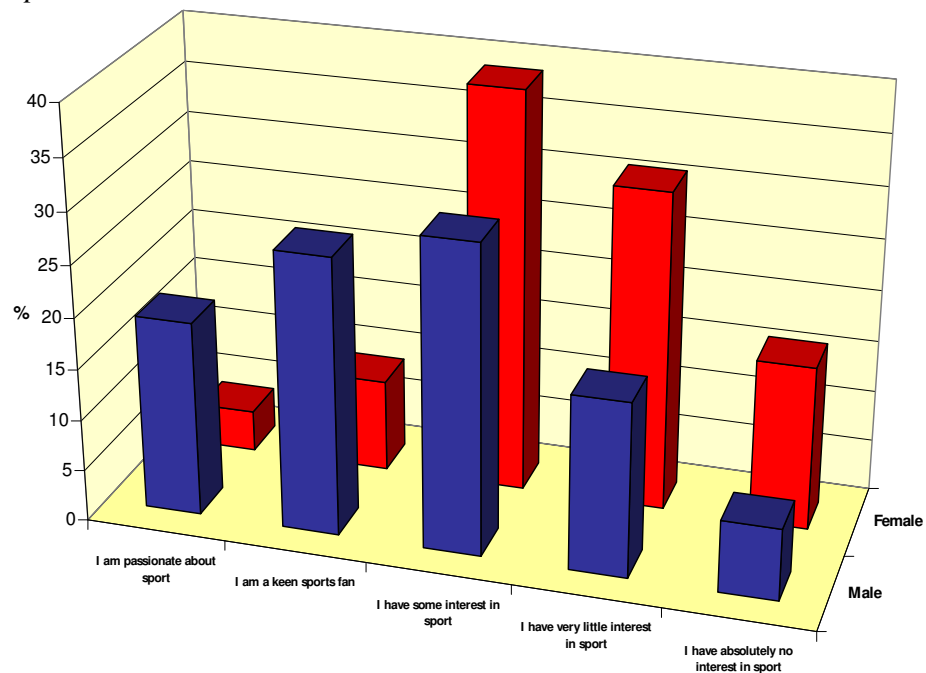
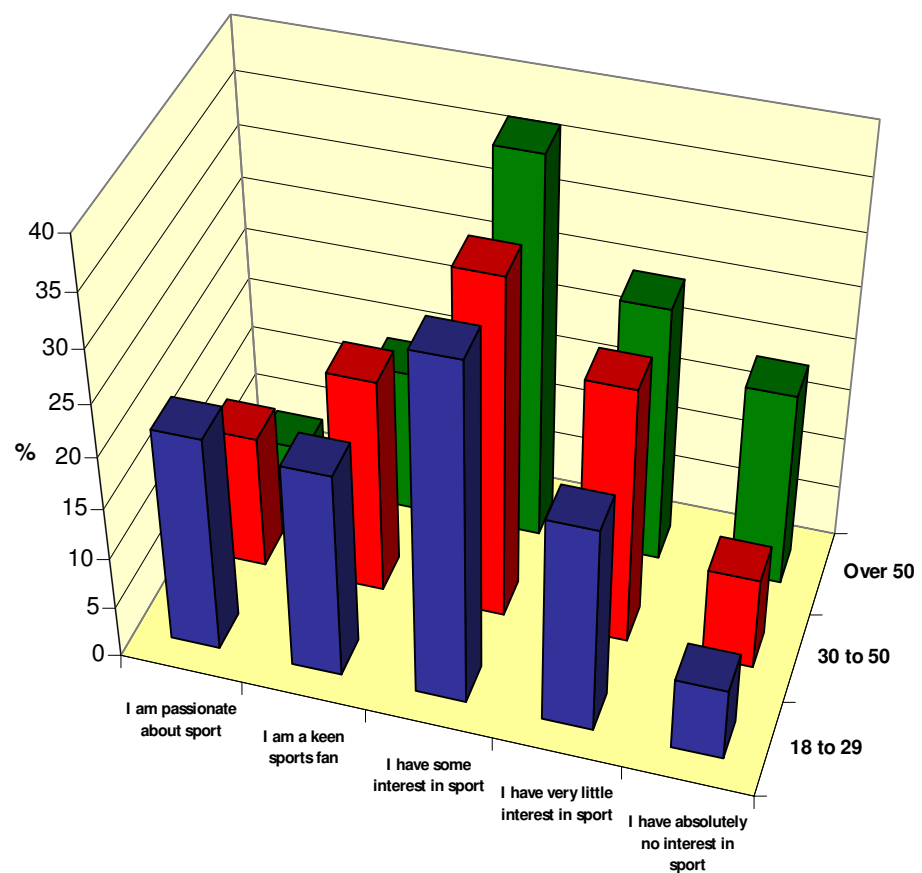


Figure 7 shows the breakdown by age. The 18 to 29 year olds have the most positive attitude towards sport, with 41% stating that they are passionate or keen sports fans. This compares to 34% of the 30 to 50 year olds. The over 50s are the least interested in sport, with 62% saying that they have some or little interest in sport and almost one fifth (19%) saying they have absolutely no interest in sport.

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Fig. 7 (All who work - by age) Which of the following best describes your attitude towards sport?



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Sport as a tool for communication

Among the poll respondents who said they have an interest in sport, 37% state that they talk about sport with others at work every day or almost every day. Almost one fifth of the sample said that they talk about sport at work once a week. A similar percentage (18%) said they do so less than once a month. Sport, then, is a popular topic of conversation.

Men talk about sport at work more frequently than women. More than half of men (53%) stated that sport is a topic of conversation with work colleagues every day or almost every day, compared to just 16% of women. A similar proportion of women, said they talk about sport at work once a week (21%), less than once a month (23%) or never (19%). (Figure 8)

The following quotes reflect the consensus among the focus group respondents.

“Well, the day usually starts with talking about sport. It’s kind of how you break into the day. When you leave in the afternoon it’s usually talking about what sports are coming up that night and what’s coming up at the weekend if it’s a Friday.”

“We speak a lot about sport or other popular things, but sport does take up quite a lot of what we talk about, especially after a weekend or when something’s happened.”

“Watching football is funny because you talk about it the night you watch it and then you come to the office the next day and you repeat what you talked about and you try and pick up pieces of what you can’t remember. You go round in circles because you have the conversation once and then you have it again the next day and it really just kind of keeps things going.”

“The other two guys that I work with in their twenties and thirties are very much into sport and we talk about it so much that if other people join us for lunch they sometimes get a bit annoyed and try to change the subject! But we always get back on to football at some point.”



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Some women in the focus groups perceived their gender to be more interested in doing sport or talking about their own sporting experiences and achievements, rather than having conversations about sporting events.

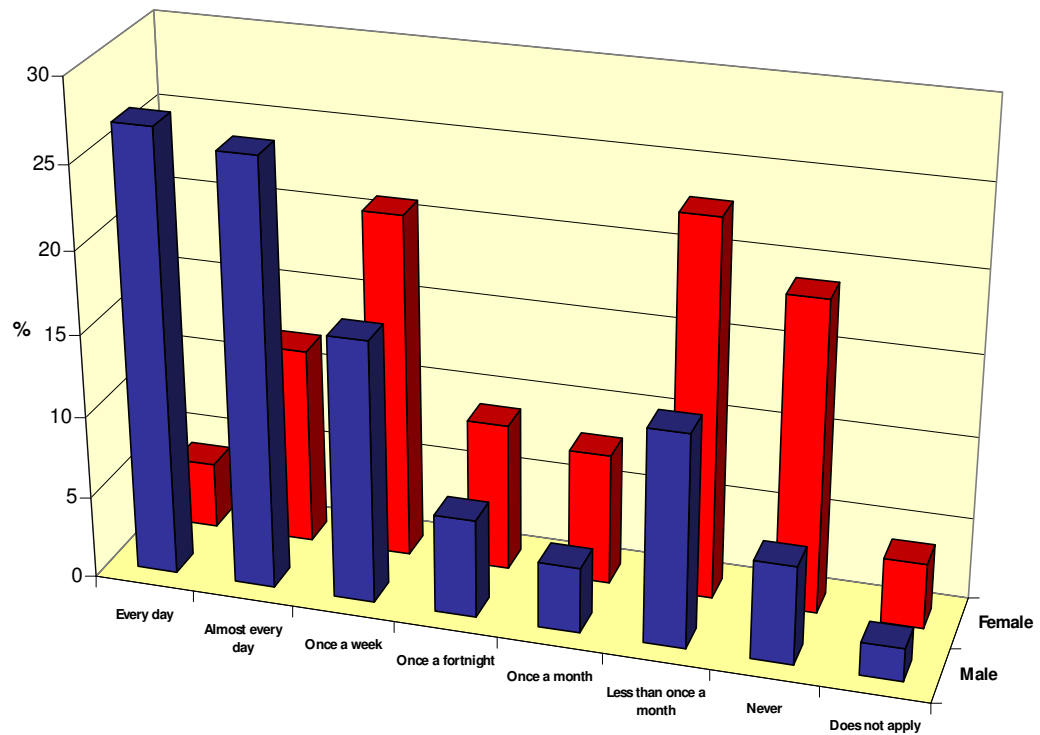
“I work in an office where they are all women and we don’t really talk about football. I think one of us goes to see the rugby, but she doesn’t really talk about it. But again, browsing the web or looking at the news we might sort of mention it and then that’s it, but we certainly don’t talk about it over lunch!”

“We talk a lot about exercise and what’s good for you and what you should do and what you should eat and just sort of exercise in general rather than sporting events.”

“We go running together and do things like that. We’re always giving each other advice, but we hardly ever talk about sport even though I think some of them are interested in it.”

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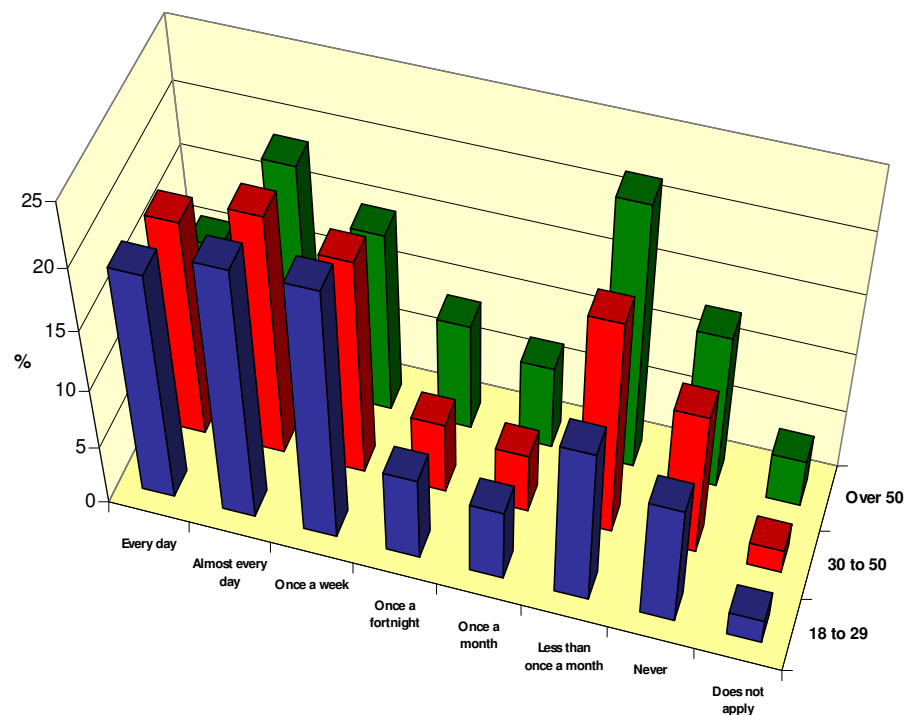
Fig. 8 (All who work and have an interest in sport – by sex) On average, how often do you talk about sport or sporting events with others you work with?



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Those under 50 engage in sporting conversation more frequently than their older colleagues. Approximately 40% of the 18 to 29 year olds and 30 to 50s talk about sport at work every day or almost every day, compared to 30% of the over 50s. (Figure 9)

Fig. 9 (All who work and have an interest in sport – by age) On average, how often do you talk about sport or sporting events with others you work with?



Being able to talk about sport is useful and, in some instances, even essential to facilitate communication among colleagues at all levels. Just under one third (30%) of respondents stated that having conversations about sport at work allows them to communicate more effectively with colleagues. Over 40% of poll respondents said that having conversations about sport improves the general mood at work, while over a quarter (26 %) said it helps them to feel part of a team. (Figure 10).

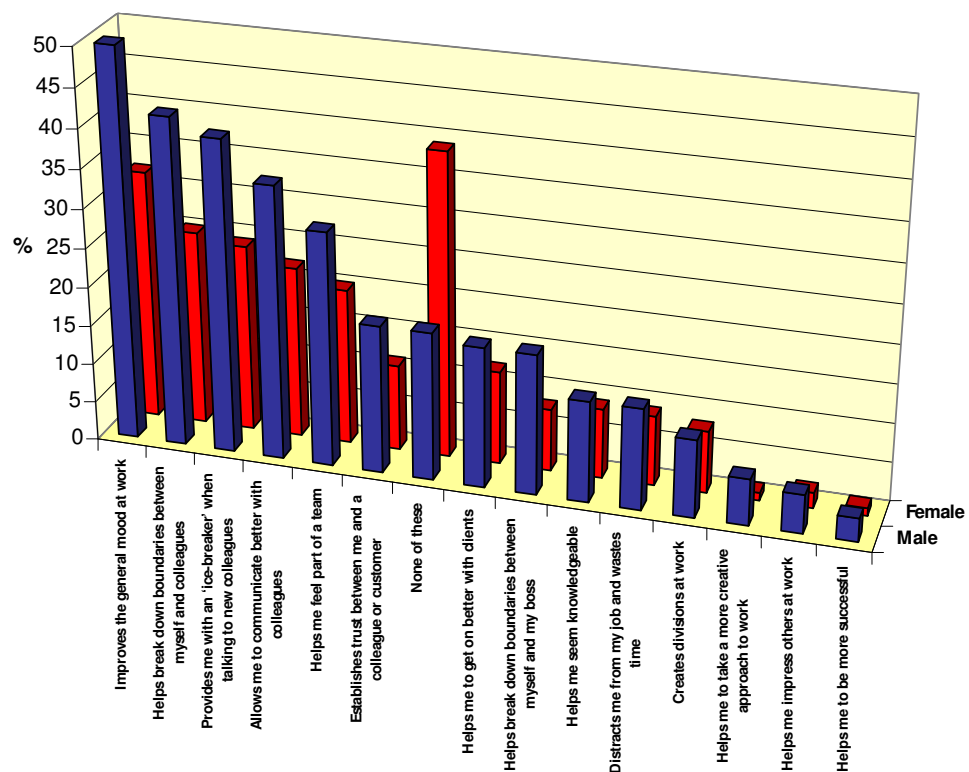
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"The communication between the small pockets of people about sport certainly makes things tick along and go better."

Having knowledge of sport is also perceived to be good practice in the workplace.

"When a sport is somebody's passion, you feel obliged to find out more about it. It's almost part of having good manners in the working environment."

Fig. 10 (All who work and discuss sport) Which of the following statements do you agree with? [Pease tick all those you agree with] Having conversations about sport at work:



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Breaking down barriers

Half of male respondents and approximately one third of women (32%) said that talking sport improves the general mood at work. (Figure 10) Over a third of poll respondents said that conversations about sport at work helps to break down boundaries between themselves and colleagues. A quarter of women (25%) and 42% of men said this is the case. Over a fifth of women (22%) and 35% of men said that talking sport is a tool which improves communication with colleagues.

One focus group respondent described talking about sport as a form of currency, a way of breaking down a social barrier and making a connection with a colleague.

"It [sport] gives you an 'in'. When you run into somebody on a Monday morning, you know what they may have been up to at the weekend. It just gives you something to talk about other than the weather."

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 of men (18 %) and 8% of women said that sporting conversations help to break down boundaries with their boss.

"The commercial director in our division comes into the office and generally we don't talk about work, we just talk about sport so it helps break down some barriers with higher senior management. It's certainly good for our department in that sense."

"It's different on managerial levels, especially if you've got a manager that supports your team. If he doesn't then you've got that sort of natural competition haven't you, which is quite healthy so long as you don't take it too far."

"Someone who is quite junior can talk to somebody quite senior who shares an interest in a sport or a team."

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The younger the employee, the more relevant this appears to be. One fifth of 18 to 29 year olds said this is the case, compared to 15% of 30 to 50s and only 7% of the over 50s. Managers also perceive talking about sport to be a way of learning about people who work in their teams. It provides a means of initiating contact and paves the way for an ongoing dialogue between colleagues. Some focus group respondents suggested that this dialogue helps to enthuse employees and makes them more productive.

"From a manager's point of view, it's very good to interact with people who have an interest in sport because you can relate to them and you learn a lot by just listening to what they have to say. You learn about the team they support and why they're supporting them."

"I think you can ask a bit more from someone once you've connected and they will actually do it because they are able to speak to you on a different level. There was a young lad who was very quiet, but was suddenly full of energy and enthusiasm after our sport conversations."

Other respondents described sport talk as a method for initiating conversation with new employees. A quarter of women (24%) and 40% of men describe sporting conversations as an ice-breaker when talking to new colleagues.

"With someone new you might probe them a bit and see whether they'd be happy talking on that level about sport, but you wouldn't make a judgement about them based on what they knew. It's just whether it's alright to bring them into a heavy conversation about football or something."

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Sporting events involving a number of nations are perceived to instil a healthy competitive edge in multinational working environments.

“When there is big a event like the Six Nations or the World Cup, that’s when the interest starts with the English workers and the French, the German workers, and the Italians. It’s very healthy. There is no bitterness whatsoever, it’s sport at its best, it’s sport which is shared with passion and obviously a bit of cheekiness with the French!”

“It does sometimes spark a conversation with an individual that you wouldn’t have [spoken to] otherwise. If, for example, his team is against yours and because you’re a very keen supporter of your own country, say France/England, then you suddenly have that two or three minute conversation which breaks the ice.”

For respondents in the services industry, talking sport can provide an opener and common ground, creating an environment more conducive to improving customer service. In the poll, 16% of respondents said that sporting conversations help them to get on better with clients and to establish a good level of trust with a customer.

Interestingly, some women who are not particularly bothered about sport use it as a way of becoming accepted by male colleagues and/or customers.

“I actually believe, certainly in the environment that I was in, that sport was used as the main topic of conversation with clients to break the ice. As a woman in a fairly male-dominated area, I used it on purpose.”

“It gives individuals an opportunity to speak to customers and open up conversations where perhaps they might have been a little bit more reserved. They’ve actually got something to break the ice and then deliver something that they might not have delivered had they not been able to conduct a conversation.”

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The divisive effects of sport

However, there are occasions when sport can be a divisive force in the workplace. Although sporting conversations at work are generally viewed positively, approximately one tenth of the poll respondents said that they can create divisions at work.

The following quotes from the focus groups illustrate this finding.

“I think sport can actually create barriers as well. People feel excluded, or you know if they don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“There seems to be a bit of a gender split with our cluster that go to lunch. The men talk about sport much more than the girls and if there’s three men and one girl the men will kind of be a little bit aware that they don’t want to just stick to football because you’re kind of excluding somebody from the conversation.”

“You can feel quite uncomfortable when you’re with people who are very sporty.”

In a team environment, it is perceived to be particularly important to reinforce inclusiveness. Those employees who do not get enthused by sport should be encouraged to involve colleagues in those interests they are passionate about, such as film, TV, art or literature.

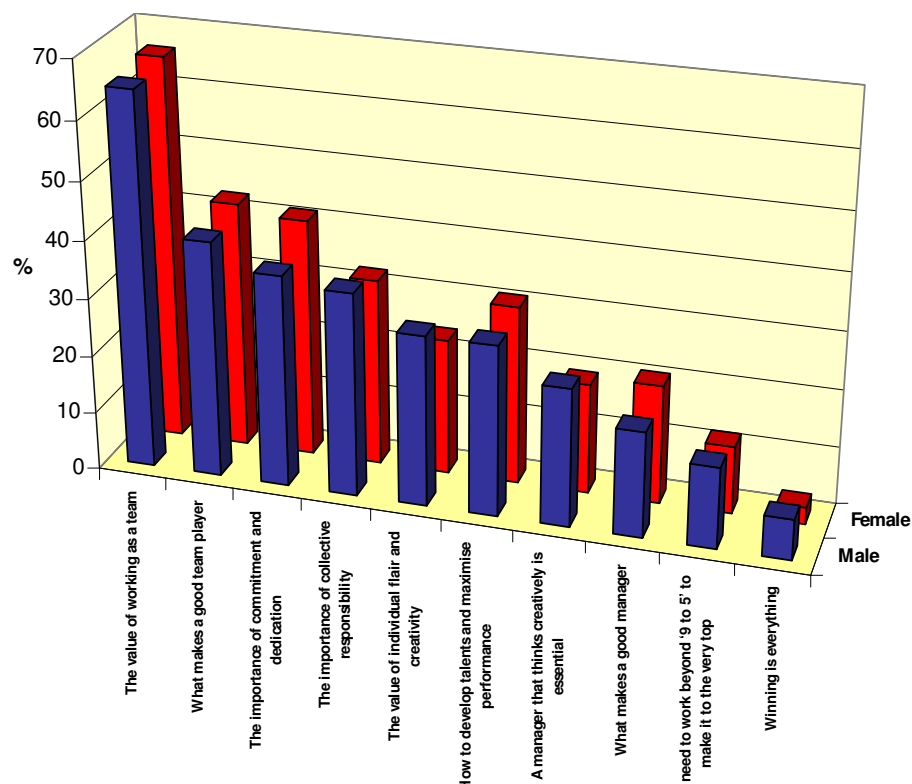
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Learning lessons from sport

Almost three-quarters of men (71%) and 68% of women said that employers and employees can learn lessons from major sports. Figure 11 indicates the range of these responses. Of these respondents, two thirds of men and women stated that lessons can be learnt about the value of working as a team.

"It's very difficult in sales without becoming like David Brent in the way that you inspire a team, but it does come down to the fact that they want to do things for you. It doesn't matter what their role is, they just want to do things for you and they want to do the best thing they can and this is very much a sports sort of thing, they'll just go out to bat and they'll do whatever they can."

Fig.11 (by sex) Which, if any, of the following do you think employers and employees can learn from major sports? [Please tick all that apply]



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The team theme continues, with approximately 40% of men and women thinking that major sports can help identify and influence what makes a good team player and the importance of commitment and dedication. Around one third suggest that the importance of collective responsibility can be nurtured, as well as how to develop talents and maximise performance. A quarter of women and 30% of men suggest that major sports can demonstrate the value of individual flair and creativity.

“Like the team that I’ve got, there’re all sort of young blokes between 25 and 35 and they all love their sports and if you can do a sort of like chat where you gee them all up and get them all on the same page then they will go out and perform. I do see a similarity, certainly in sales anyway, between what goes on in a sales environment and what goes on in a sporting environment where you’re getting that motivation and you’re getting that commitment.”

The poll results reveal that respondents think management can also learn from major sports. Approximately a quarter of men and one fifth of women think that major sports can teach managers about the importance of thinking creatively. One fifth of men and women also state that major sports can reflect the skills that make a good manager, suggesting that managers and employees should look to the sporting world for some valuable lessons that can be brought to bear on the working world.

“From personal experience, having played football and having played under a manager, one of the things that I always found was that the manager would always find a way of getting the best out of each of his players to make a ‘whole’ team.”

“In my experience in the workplace, I would encourage people for their strengths, but also try to look at their weaknesses and obviously help them to get better. Concentrate on the things that people do really well, but then obviously help them to develop things that they don’t do so well. If you’re doing that collectively, then you become a stronger team.”



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One focus group respondent summarised how winning in sport and winning and achieving at work can have the same uplifting impact, particularly when working as part of a team.

"I think most people like to have a win. I mean you're at work and you want to have something that makes you feel like, hey! That comes from sport and certainly in a sales environment you've got to give them a win. People respond to that on a basic level. Everyone likes a win and if you've got a team together then everyone will celebrate the person who wins. If there's a loss, then you'll crowd round each other and you'll empathise with each other and that bonding of 'oh my god, we've got stuffed again' will move you on to the next level."

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Harnessing sport to boost morale and productivity

The majority of respondents suggest that employers and employees can use sport as a tool to boost morale and productivity in the workplace: 80% of men and 70% of women said this was the case (Figure 12).

Of these respondents, 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 the male respondents and 43% of women suggest that encouraging staff to play sport together, via football, netball or tennis leagues would help to boost morale and productivity. Approximately one third of women and men believe that sponsoring staff who specialise in sport would achieve these aims.

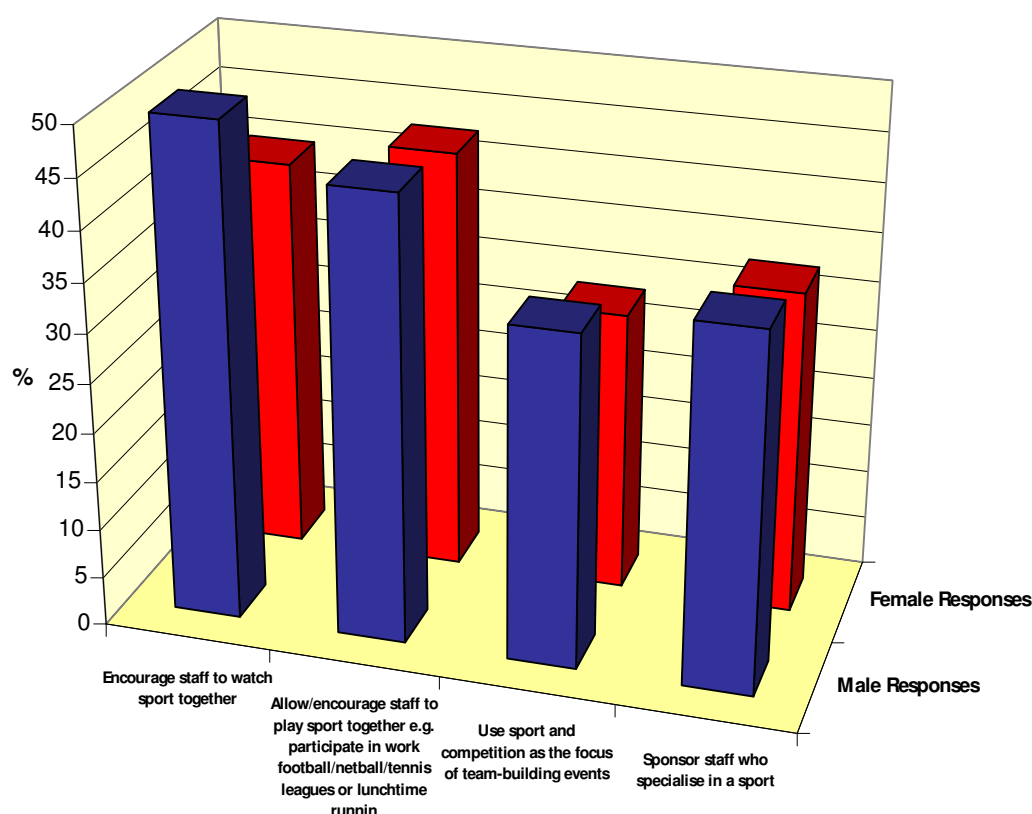
A third of men (34%) and 29% of women stated that sport and competition could be used as the focus of team-building events. The following quotes from the focus group participants indicate the role such events have played for some employees:

“It opens your eyes because you see it from a different angle and it makes you realise what goes on every day and how you can take a different view. It makes you realise what you are doing and it focuses you to think in a different way for a period of time. It was quite a positive thing and everybody else thought it was as well.”

“It just taught us those same lessons about strengths and weaknesses in the team and how to play to the strengths.”

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Fig.12 How do you think employers and employees can use sport to boost morale and productivity in the workplace? [Please tick all that apply]



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The economic impact of sporting success or failure

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. Improved economic performance has also been attributed to a country's team's winning streak.

Some academic studies exist that have attempted to quantify the economic impact of sporting success. Dobson & Goddard¹ for example, focused on publicly-owned football teams and how their results affected the clubs' share price. Boyle & Walter² investigated the relationship between New Zealand share prices and the performance of the All Blacks.

The most useful in the context of this research is a paper by Ashton et al³ which investigated the association between stock market performance (FTSE 100) and the performance of the England football team in both international friendlies and tournament matches. One might expect that the 'feel good' factor arising from a national team's success would instil a sense of optimism that then might be reflected in greater confidence about the future.

An efficient stock market will revise expectations of the potential economic benefits to be derived from national team performance in the light of individual match results and the likelihood of the team progressing further in the tournament.

¹ Dobson, S. & Goddard, J. (2001). *The Economics of Football*, Cambridge University Press.

² Boyle, G. & Walter, B. (2003). Reflected glory and failure: international sporting success and the stock market, *Applied Financial Economics*, **13**, p.225-235.

³ Ashton, J.K., Gerrard, B. & Hudson, R. (2003). Economic impact of national sporting success: evidence from the London stock exchange, *Applied Economic Letters*, **10**, p.783-785.

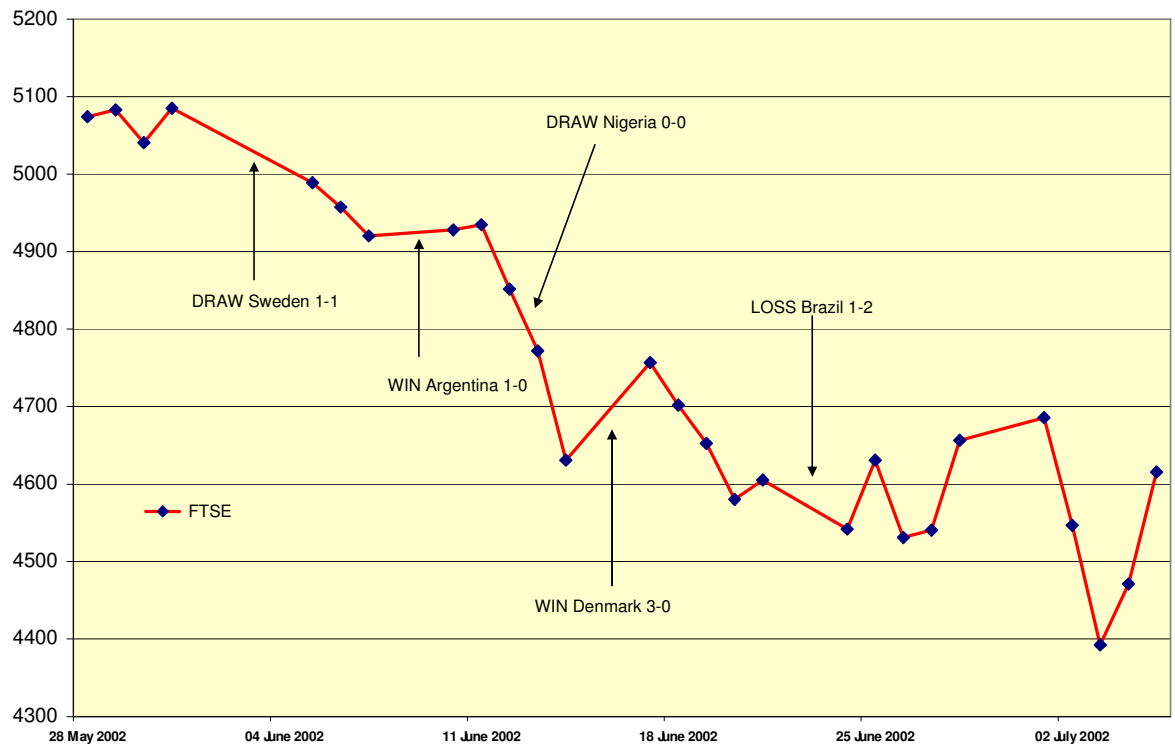
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The authors found a statistically significant relationship between the performance of the English national side and fluctuations in the performance of the FTSE 100 by analysing England internationals and FTSE figures between 6 January 1984 and 2 July 2002. Following an England victory (all internationals), the mean return on the FTSE for the following day's trading was found to be 0.1705%, after a draw -0.000481% and after a loss -1.289%. Furthermore, the more important the match, the stronger the relationship between the results of the England team and the subsequent market returns. Following an England success in tournament finals (European Championship or World Cup), the mean return on the FTSE was 0.2698%, after a draw -0.2129% and after a loss -4.150%. The unconditional daily return on the index for this period was 0.03511%.

It is possible that the manner of win / loss, the quality of the opposition and how well the team performed may also have an impact, but these subjective assessments would be extremely difficult to quantify with any degree of accuracy. What we can do, however, is to look at FTSE movements following some recent memorable matches. The day after England lost dramatically to France, in the closing minutes of their opening game in Euro 2004, the FTSE fell by 1.13%. When the team was dispatched from the 2002 World Cup by Ronaldinho's questionable 'shot' for Brazil, the FTSE arguably reflected our collective grief and closed down 63 points (-1.38%). The results from the 2002 World Cup and the movement of the FTSE are illustrated in Fig. 13 below.

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Fig.13 FTSE



Draws with Sweden and Nigeria seem to have done little to inspire confidence and the effect of defeating Argentina appears to be minimal. A convincing victory over Denmark in the first round of the knockout stages, however, was followed by a 126 point rise on the FTSE, representing an increase of 2.72% and the biggest daily point rise in the index since 13 November 2001.

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It is possible that stock performance may also be influenced by other sporting successes, but unlike football there is no empirical evidence to support this opinion. England's triumph in the rugby World Cup was followed by a 1.47% rise in the FTSE 100. On the day of the celebratory parade in London on 9 December 2003, it increased by 0.45%. Similarly, the Ashes victory in September last year was followed by a small rise of 0.29%.

As the England national football side has failed to win a tournament since 1966, predicting the economic impact of England actually lifting the trophy 40 years on is not without its problems. More recent winners of the tournament have enjoyed improvements in their national economies following their performances and successes in the competition. Some pundits have gone so far as to suggest that these factors may be related.

The growth of Argentina's real GDP went from -7% in 1985 to 7.1% in 1986, the year that they won the World Cup. On the two previous occasions that Brazil has lifted the trophy, the growth of the country's real GDP climbed from 4.9% in 1993 to 5.9% in 1994 and from 1.3% in 2001 to 1.9% in 2002.

France enjoyed a 3.4% growth of real GDP in 1998 and a 3.2% growth in 1999, following its victory as the host nation in 1998. This represented the biggest growth in GDP experienced by France in 9 years, with the country out-performing the UK, the G7, the E12 and the EU25. France's productivity increased year-on-year from 0.9 to 1.2% in 1998 and from 1.2 to 2.0% in 1999, and also experienced an increase in its current account balance during this period, rising from \$33.0bn to \$34.7bn in 1998 and further increasing to \$39.5bn in 1999.

All this suggests that large-scale sporting events may have a tangible impact upon the economic performance of a country and, by implication, of businesses contributing to that economy. English success in the forthcoming World Cup, the 2007 Rugby World Cup, or the next Ashes series could well provide a fillip to the UK economy.

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Conclusions

This study has shown that sport is woven into the fabric of working life and plays a huge part in creating bonds between colleagues and customers. 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. Moreover, our fascination with sport can boost business performance and bring substantial financial benefits to those companies whose culture embraces sport.

Making the most of sport in the workplace

But how can employers make a conscious effort to harness the effect of sport, to enhance the already considerable impact that sport has on workplace culture, morale and productivity? Hudson's recommendations follow:

- Encourage staff to watch sport together: In recent years, businesses have begun to wise up to the cultural benefits of providing communal screenings of big sporting events in the workplace. The energy and goodwill generated by collective support and interaction on a large scale ensures that employees feel valued and more willing to engage in work after the event. Why not take it further? Trail the event in the weeks leading up to it to boost expectation. Organise sweepstakes and healthy competition between staff. And don't forget to allow non-supporters time off to pursue other interests - offer a film screening or trip to the ice rink to foster team spirit, instead of causing resentment at their lack of inclusion.



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- Enable staff to network at sporting events with customers: Faced with a myriad of choice, customers buy from those they like and trust. Allowing staff to bond with clients at sporting events provides them with something more interesting to talk about than product features or ‘USPs’.
- Encourage staff to play sport together: Running clubs, netball, football or tennis leagues at lunchtime or after work to ensure that employees develop shared interests, meet colleagues they might not normally come into contact with, and return to work feeling invigorated and more productive. Recent studies have shown that a healthy workforce takes fewer days off work and is more productive during the working day.
- Use sport as the focus of team-building events: Healthy competition between staff can engender team spirit and lead to the creation of bonds between management and more junior staff.
- Sponsor staff who specialise in a sport: Be a socially responsible employer and support employees’ charitable efforts. Arrange a trip for staff to watch their colleague perform. Ask the sports enthusiast to run a lunchtime coaching session for other staff, or arrange a presentation on what they’ve learnt from being part of a sports team, how to maximise performance, what makes a good manager, and how to remain motivated.

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Case studies

ASDA

Kirsty Leyland, Head of Colleague Policy



ASDA, one of the UK's largest retailers, recognises that sport can act as a binding force for colleagues (ASDA's name for employees) and customers. ASDA encourages colleagues to watch sport together and to actively participate in sport. 2006 sees the introduction of ASDA's combined football and netball "Tackle It" tournament, with teams from across the country competing and raising money for the cancer research charity, Everyman. ASDA also sponsors and supports staff competing in sporting events, such as the London Marathon or the Three Peaks Challenge. And ASDA is a sponsor of the highly successful Leeds Ladies Football Team, where colleagues can network with suppliers and customers.

For the World Cup, ASDA has offered employees up to two weeks' unpaid leave during the tournament. ASDA's management has recognised that productivity can, in fact, increase during a major sporting event. ASDA strives to capitalise on the collective excitement generated in the build-up to and during a major sporting tournament by offering employees extended breaks and a shift-swapping policy, so employees can plan their work around games. Consequently, ASDA does not suffer absenteeism, and staff morale remains high. With the new World Cup Leave policy this year, ASDA will be able to manage staffing levels to ensure customer service remains unaffected.

Kirsty Leyland, Head of Colleague Policy at ASDA, says:

"In recognition of the immense impact the World Cup will have on ASDA, we've introduced a special 'World Cup Leave' policy. This has been hugely popular amongst our staff, with many employees taking up this unpaid leave. We're ensuring our staff are motivated and productive during the World Cup by allowing them to choose the times they work. In this way, we simultaneously ensure all our customers still receive the excellent service they've come to expect. We expect the World Cup to have an impact on our sales, but it's a key part of our strategy to ensure that we also boost staff morale and harness the nation's excitement to sustain and even increase our productivity."

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Hudson

Rob Chandler, Head of Human Resources

Hudson, the global professional services recruitment consultancy, believes business relationships can be cemented by attending sporting events with clients. Throughout the year, Hudson employees not only attend various sporting events with clients (from the Ryder Cup to client golfing days), but also business presentations and seminars at major sporting venues with leading sporting figures. Hudson has successfully run the Hudson Challenge, a team-building event for Scottish companies, for three years.

Hudson regularly uses sport and competition to foster team spirit. Teams from around the world compete in the fiercely contested 'Hudson Olympics', and there are mini football leagues between offices in different countries. Hudson staff participate in charitable team events, such as the Sahara Challenge and the Caledonian Challenge. And Hudson actively encourages staff to compete in a range of sporting endeavours with their colleagues: the London office has well subscribed football and softball teams, the Dublin office fields a football team, and the Edinburgh office has a running group.

Hudson uses sport to incentivise its staff to succeed, with a competition based on achieving and exceeding targets. 'The Caribbean Challenge' will see winning staff visit the cricket World Cup in the West Indies in 2007, while the 'Commonwealth Challenge' encouraged staff to perform well at work in order to secure a trip to Melbourne's Commonwealth Games.

Rob Chandler, Head of Human Resources at Hudson, says:

"Sporting events establish a strong bond between team members from across the organisation, encouraging colleagues to share information, which can produce useful business leads. Business relationships can often be cemented whilst talking sport, playing sport, or attending a sporting event. Recruitment and HR consultancy thrive on relationships, so it is vital for us to build that trust and friendship with clients in social situations. Sport is a perfect vehicle for that."

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About Hudson

Hudson delivers specialised professional recruitment, outsourcing, and human capital solutions worldwide. From single placements to total solutions, the firm helps clients achieve greater organisational performance by assessing, recruiting, developing and engaging the best and brightest people for their businesses. Hudson is a division of Hudson Highland Group, Inc. one of the world's leading professional recruitment, retained executive search and human capital solution providers. The company employs more than 3,800 professionals serving clients and candidates in more than 20 countries through its Hudson and Highland Partners businesses.

More information is available at www.hudson.com.

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About SIRC

The Social Issues Research Centre is an independent, non-profit organisation founded to conduct research on social and lifestyle issues, monitor and assess global sociocultural trends and provide new insights on human behaviour and social relations.

More information is available at www.sirc.org.

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