



GAME ON

Even without Ireland's participation, World Cup 2006 will be a must-see for many footie fans. But, **Gordon Smith** asks, what about work?

YOU'RE all set for the big kick-off: you have the match fixtures loaded into your email calendar, you've had a sneaky flutter on a dark horse for the tournament and you know more than most doctors about the extent of Wayne Rooney's injury. You're counting the minutes until the World Cup starts in Germany on 9 June. There's just one small problem: the day job.

Workers all over Ireland are gearing up for the competition despite the absence of the boys in green and many have already begun adopting teams to support instead, such as Paraguay, Trinidad & Tobago or Sweden. Moreover, the multinational nature of the country's workforce means that many people will have genuine reasons to follow the fortunes of the teams over the next month.

But here's where the potential for conflict arises: first-round matches taking place during the working week are scheduled to start at 2pm, 5pm and 8pm, with the earliest timeslot obviously causing the most hassle for salaried employees. Through a quirk of the fixture list, there appear to be few must-see games scheduled for 2pm — for a neutral anyway — but try telling that to an Australian (v Japan 2pm Tuesday, 13 June) or a Spaniard (v Ukraine, 2pm Wednesday, 14 June).

The dilemma is: do you take an extra long lunch break and hope the boss doesn't notice? Or should you try to work a few extra hours in advance so you can take some time off to watch an important game? And what if your team wins a crunch match and you're obliged to toast their success — will an employer look kindly when you call in 'sick' the following day?

For World Cup 2002 some companies set up

TVs or screens in an office or recreation area so that staff could keep a weather eye on games. The thinking behind this policy was that having employees skive off on company premises rather than heading to the pub was the lesser of two evils. Over the next month, the tournament will be a great talking point in staff canteens and by the water cooler, so companies may feel that having a sweep or having pools of desks adopt a team for some inter-company rivalry can be valuable in team bonding.

Google, which employs more than 700 people in Ireland, hopes that people can view the games in their own time without impacting too much on their normal, day-to-day work, according to human resources manager Rachel Mooney.

Disappearing from the office or calling in sick isn't acceptable, she adds. "We adopt a mature approach to our employees needs and expect that approach in return."

Peter Cosgrove, country manager of the recruitment and HR consultancy Hudson, believes some World Cup-related disruption will be inevitable and says it's incumbent on employers to plan for it and manage it through clear and fair communication with staff. Some companies may operate flexible hours to allow employees to take the time off for a match they really want to see. "If this is possible, it is well worth doing," Cosgrove notes.

Staff who feel that management are being unfair will not only be more likely to take the time off anyway; they are also more likely to

be demotivated at work and even though they are present they remain unproductive."

Giving staff clear goals to achieve before going to watch the game means that everyone wins, says Cosgrove. "If they're coming in early, give them clear objectives for the day. At the end of the day, work is about results, not sitting at a desk," he points out.

Simply having staff sitting at their desks is no guarantee of quality work when World Cup fever hits anyway. Dermot Williams, managing director of Topsec Technology, refers

to this phenomenon as 'presenteeism' and points out that there is an IT angle to all of this. Many sports websites will carry breaking news from Germany, as well as live match commentaries. Even if access to a TV proves beyond some staff, there are ample opportunities to be distracted from doing proper work even while sitting at a desk. But where technology presents a problem, it also presents a solution; content filtering systems can be set to block access to these sites during working hours. Williams suggests that this block can be removed during lunch hour to allow staff to catch up on developments in their own time, not on the company's.

Strange as it may seem to the football-obsessed, there are people who won't be too bothered about events in Germany over the next month and Cosgrove says it is important that they don't feel left out. Radios and TVs should be out of sight and earshot — maybe in a canteen or boardroom — so as not to distract people or affect their work. Equally, noses are sure to be out of joint if an employer is making concessions to football fans only. "Remember the people who aren't interested in the World Cup. If you're offering flexi-time for football fans, think about the others," says Mooney.

Google is mindful that not everyone shares the same passion for the game. "We believe all employees are equal so no special treatment would be given to football fans over non-football fans," she says.

But the upside of not having Ireland in the competition (lower risk of absenteeism) is offset by the feel-good factor and buzz that's generated by having a team in the world's biggest sporting event, which can in turn lead to better morale among employees. Recent research by Hudson showed that 66pc of men and 44pc of women believed their team doing well makes them more motivated and has a positive effect on productivity.

In any event, the first-round stage of the World Cup will be over before long. By the time the last ball has been kicked, football fans can console themselves by remembering that the start of the new season will be a few short weeks away. Employers can count themselves lucky that it only comes around every four years — now there's just the small matter of September's Ryder Cup to worry about...



Clockwise from top left: Ruud van Nistelrooy of Netherlands; Thierry Henry of France; and Michael Ballack of Germany are footballers to watch