

Firms tackle pros, cons of workers' fantasy leagues

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By Stephanie Armour, USA TODAY

As the pro football season approaches, employers are bracing for a potential productivity drain: the amount of time employees devote to fantasy football and other fantasy sports.

In fantasy sports, participants draft their own teams of real players and score points based on their performances. Fantasy leagues can take up valuable work time when employees go online for such activities as checking their players' performance or dropping or trading players to another team.

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On Tuesday mornings, John Scally, a public relations account supervisor in Bedminster, N.J., arrives at work and checks his team's performance.

"Ten, 15, 20 minutes ... you add that up on a 16-week season, it winds up to be a couple of days," says Scally, 37. "It eats up time."

In addition to taxing productivity, fantasy sports also can pose a legal risk to employers. Employers can face lawsuits claiming bias if office leagues exclude some workers, such as women.

Rogge Dunn, an employment lawyer in Dallas, represented a *Fortune* 500 company that was sued three years ago after employees were fired for using their work computer to access porn. One of the workers sued, saying the firing was discriminatory because the company allowed office pools on work computers.

"The guy had a point," says Dunn, adding that the case settled out of court. "Some states may also have laws that prohibit a gambling operation. Employers need to think about this."

But there is also an upside.

Playing fantasy football can build camaraderie in the office, and playing can also help some companies build connections when they join leagues with clients.

Michael Cohen, an employment lawyer in Philadelphia, participates in at least two fantasy leagues a year. The one at work included partners, associates and non-legal staff. "The best thing about it is the camaraderie.

Everyone was on an even playing field, no one felt superior to anyone," Cohen says. "There were men and women. It was very cool and would allow for conversations that wouldn't have happened."

The typical fantasy consumer has played for nine years and competes in an average of six contests or leagues for various sports throughout the year. These educated professionals live in suburban areas and spend an average of almost \$500 annually on their magazines, online information, contests and leagues, according to the Fantasy Sports Trade Association.

Michael Henby, author of *Fantasy Kick*, a book about leveraging fantasy football in the office to provide a career boost, says workers "can really use the game for networking."

"It's like the new version of golf," he says. "Why do people want to play golf with the boss? So they can get good face time. Fantasy football allows you to be with a group of people from different departments."

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