
March Madness Brings Distractions, Gambling, Fun to the Workplace

[^ Return to top](#)

Have you filled out your 2019 March Madness bracket? You may not have, but your employees very likely did.

This year, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) 81st annual college basketball tournament — dubbed March Madness — runs March 19 through April 8. The 68-team single-elimination tournament will have 67 games spread over three weeks.

Last year, more than 97 million U.S. viewers watched the tournament, and 69.7 million people viewed official March Madness social content, [according to the NCAA](#).

With so many games in such a short period, [employees](#) are likely bringing their March Madness spirit into the workplace. While it will cause some distraction and other potential issues, the March Madness workplace infiltration isn't all bad — here's what to expect over the next few weeks.

Get Ready for Distracted Employees

March Madness will distract many of your employees. Major sporting events distract 49 percent of professionals at work, up from 38 percent in 2016, according to a recent [Robert Half survey](#). This works out to more than 75 million employees in the U.S. who will be distracted while on the clock. Younger workers are more likely to be distracted than older workers; 66 percent of workers between the ages of 18 to 34 admit to being distracted compared to 43 percent of workers ages 34-54 and 27 percent of workers 55 and older.

How distracted will they be? A [2018 survey](#) from Robert Half estimated employees will spend 25.5 minutes each workday on March Madness-related activities, which adds up to six hours per employee over the next three weeks.

Using these estimates, March Madness will cost employers an estimated \$13.3 billion in lost productivity in 2019, according to a [recent report](#) from Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc.

During work hours, employees may be:

- Checking game scores;

-
- Comparing team rankings;
 - Conversing more frequently about games with co-workers;
 - Working, monitoring and lamenting their playoff brackets; and
 - Watching the games (many they can stream on their computers).

That 2018 Robert Half survey also found that 62 percent of employees take time to check game scores and team rankings and 59 percent talk more frequently about sports at work.

Thirty-seven percent of March Madness watchers admit they watch games at their desks, according to a [2018 survey](#) from TSheets by QuickBooks. Another 20 percent watch games with their co-workers and 30 percent watch while working from home.

With the [28 percent increase](#) in March Madness livestreams last year, people can watch the games from practically anywhere and many do. Twenty percent of employee watch the games in their cars and another 20 percent admit to enjoying games from the restroom.

When it comes to distraction, assess employee [conduct](#) objectively. If a particular employee isn't getting his/her work done, you can [discipline](#) based on the lack of productivity — just make sure you treat all employees consistently.

This, however, isn't the only problem March Madness can bring to your workplace.

Gambling ... in the Workplace?

In 2018, the American Gambling Association [estimated](#) that Americans wagered more than \$10 billion on March Madness — but only \$300 million (3 percent) was wagered legally through Nevada sports books. This means most gambling happens in private bets and sports pools, such as fantasy leagues and March Madness brackets.

Although currently two-thirds of states (including California) make it illegal to participate in sports pools if money is involved, 24 million people still participate in March Madness sports pools annually. Twice as much money is wagered on March Madness compared to the Super Bowl, according to [WalletHub](#).

While employees may have their own personal sports pools, 41 percent of workers have participated in college basketball brackets in their offices, as a 2017 Randstad US [study](#) found. Employees contribute an average of \$22.44 to an office pool.

Workplace gambling can be destructive, such as employees with serious gambling problems stealing from employers. CalChamber's white paper on [Four Ways Employers Can Combat Workplace Gambling](#) can help employers.

March Madness Isn't All Bad

Surprisingly, March Madness can improve office morale and encourage co-worker bonding. Several surveys also say it *increases* worker productivity.

In a recent Robert Half [survey](#), 72 percent of managers say that college basketball playoff activities in the office increase staff morale and 52 percent of managers see productivity benefits. In fact, 75 percent of companies organize sports-related festivities. Companies celebrate with friendly competitions (45 percent), wearing team apparel (43 percent), watching games (29 percent) and decorating workspaces (28 percent).

While most cities with the biggest morale and productivity boasts from March Madness are in the South and Midwest, 64 percent of executives in Los Angeles reported improved productivity — the second biggest productivity boost in the nation.

A 2017 Randstad US [survey](#) reported that nine out of 10 workers (89 percent) agree that office pools help build better team camaraderie. Seventy-nine percent of employees agree that participating in office pools greatly improves their levels of engagement at work, and 39 percent of workers became better friends with a co-worker after participating in an office pool. When Generation Z and Generation X were polled, 58 percent and 41 percent of workers, respectively, became better friends with a co-worker.

"While many employers fear a loss of productivity due to the distraction of office pools during the college basketball tournament season, our findings suggest the potential short-term distraction in the office may actually be a win for employee morale, engagement and satisfaction in the long-term," said Jim Link, chief human resource officer at Randstad North America in a press release.

Andrew Challenger, vice president of global outplacement at executive coaching firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. echoes those sentiments in his firm's report, saying "the tournament is a perfect opportunity for colleagues to bond in the workplace. "Any attempt to keep workers from the games would most likely result in real damage to employee morale, loyalty and engagement that would far outweigh any short-term benefit to productivity."

Best Practices

Make March Madness work for you, not against you, by following these best practices.

- Communicate company policies to employees in advance to be clear about what is acceptable. Let employees know gambling is illegal in California.
- Create and/or reinforce [Internet usage policies](#) that cover what is acceptable and unacceptable. You may have policies that restrict personal Internet browsing except

during non-work periods and practices that block access to various types of sites where gambling might take place.

- Consistency is key. Don't forbid employees from participating in a March Madness pool while allowing them to participate in a baby pool (e.g. guess the due date).
- Encourage team spirit by allowing employees to wear their favorite team's clothing or decorate their workspaces in team colors.
- Create a March Madness bracket competition with no gambling. Instead, have teams compete against each other for bragging rights.
- Consider sponsoring a weekly pizza lunch where employees can watch a popular game if they so choose. Remember to make the event optional so employees know they're still being provided an [off-duty meal break](#).

[^ Return to top](#)

