

March Madness
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Veracorp LLC

If you listen to the news you would think that the NAACP basketball tournament is the apocalypse of business. For example, a CNN/Money report from March 10, 2007 stated that "office productivity will begin a 16-day plunge next Tuesday when workers will be too busy watching the NCAA basketball tournament on their office computers". According to a study conducted by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc., March Madness could cost American companies \$889.6 million in lost work. Challenger arrived at \$889.6 million by estimating that college basketball fans spend about 90 minutes a week, or about 13 minutes a day, trolling through basketball Web sites. Based on the average hourly pay of \$17.96, Challenger calculated the loss at \$3.89 per worker. Multiplied by 14.3 million estimated working fans, the projected loss in productivity is \$55.6 million a day, or \$889.6 million for 16 days.

But Jeff Merron, in a *Slate* magazine article (www.slate.com/id/2138123) claimed that lost productivity estimates are almost always bogus, especially when they come from attention-seeking professionals who are in the business of increasing productivity. Challenger, Gray, & Christmas helps companies "manage" plant closings, among other things. Jack Shafer, also from *Slate* magazine (www.slate.com/id/2138333) reported that Challenger's estimate misjudges the size of the dedicated audience. Additionally Challenger doesn't acknowledge that "wasted time" is built into every workday. Workers routinely shop during office hours, take extended coffee breaks, talk to friends on the phone, enjoy long lunches, or gossip around the water cooler. Furthermore, the fear that millions of workers will waste time watching the games live for hours at the office is groundless. More than two-thirds of the games are played on weeknights or weekends, when very few employees are stuck behind their work terminals. Besides, the CBS system can only accommodate 200,000 computers at a time. What then is the true story?

Or more appropriately, is watching March Madness on computers actually a way to motivate employees? Years ago when the baseball World Series was played in the daytime, my teachers (ready for this?) would let us listen to the games on the radio during class time! What a horror. When I was a teenager my boss let us watch the 1969 Superbowl (the Jets were actually in it) while we were working in his deli. During my career there were many times I and my coworkers were allowed to either listen to or watch significant sporting events during the day, often with our boss. I remember a bunch of us listening to the 1978 playoff game between the (dreaded) Yankees and Red Sox during work; we didn't get too much done while it was on but being allowed to listen enabled me to cherish the company and my boss for all these years. What else was learned from these experiences? Camaraderie, respect, autonomy, sense of purpose, appreciation, connection to our colleagues, bosses and companies, willingness to work harder after the game was over, passion, loyalty. We would tell our friends, family and neighbors how great our bosses were to allow us to participate in the activity. We were in essence becoming employee ambassadors. All this because we were allowed to watch an event that was significant to us.

Allowing employees to watch March Madness can serve the same function today as watching the other events did in the past: although it wastes time during the day it also enables workers to develop positive attitudes about their boss and company that can be used to transform them into passionate and loyal ambassadors who promote good will and trust and will work harder when the games are over. In other words, if \$889.6 million are lost, perhaps \$1 billion are gained after the games are over. Apocalypse now? What about Victory aftermath?