

Workplace wizards unite: A new union you did not invite in...

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Just when you were rid of Pokémon in your boardroom, software giant Niantic is about to disrupt your workplace again. The creators of the viral app Pokémon GO, which caused chaos and car-accidents worldwide in 2016, released another location-based augmented reality mobile game recently. This time, the game centres around J.K. Rowling's bestselling Harry Potter novels.



For the uninitiated, Wizards Unite shares one central concept with Pokémon GO - capturing things. But instead of Pokémon, players are capturing or freeing “Foundables” - magical artefacts, creatures and characters, cast into the ‘real’ world by a disastrous spell called “the Calamity”. Players need to return the Foundables to their proper places across the magical universe, and to do this, instead of throwing Pokeballs, they are casting spells by tracing patterns on their phones with their fingers.

You can play just about anywhere, which means that if employees have the game open in the workplace, Foundables can pop up, waiting to be captured, on desks, chairs, computers, in the canteen, boardrooms or even the bathrooms. Having said that, there are also specific places in the application, called Inns and Fortresses, which respectively allow players to collect energy and rare Foundables. These specific locations have even been placed in office parks and along public roads, encouraging employees to venture away from their desks. So, when a horde of employees are gathered at the smoking area, they may not all have taken up smoking... They may just be smoking Dementors at a Fortress.

Because of its very recent release, the Calamity may not have yet caused chaos, but if Pokémon is anything to GO by, employers worldwide can anticipate the same sort of anarchy. So when your workplace wizards emerge, how do you know whether they are defending against the Dark Arts?

Wheedling out the Wannabe Wizards...

Players are easy to spot based on body language alone. In large groups, they will be huddled, heads down or phones up, flicking and swiping violently at their screens (read: casting spells at mythical monsters). If they're playing with the augmented reality turned on, you'll see them moving their phones around like they're taking a chaotic panoramic photo.

The spell cast over my workforce

We anticipate that this app will also cause a number of accidents – vehicle crashes, collisions with walls, falls down stairs. This is borne out by the specific warning for players to be aware of their surroundings. As with the devastation caused by Pokémon GO, the game's impact will largely depend on the type of business the employer runs and the role in which the Wannabe Wizard is employed. You do not want your employee wizarding whilst he is on the road delivering goods.

Where an employee causes damage to property or persons their employer can be held liable for their conduct. The principle of vicarious liability entitles the so-called victim to recover damages from the employer, where the damage was caused, intentionally or negligently, in the course of performance of the employee's duties. Accordingly, if a driver crashes into another driver, whilst playing Wizards Unite, the driver into whom he crashed may be entitled to recover damages from the Wannabe Wizard's employer.

The risk of any real damage is fairly minimal. However, the more likely risk is that productivity will be cast into the depths of the Deathly Hallows. Since the game is premised on the player moving around and changing locations (read: not at their desk, or even in the building), employees on their scavenger hunt will not be productive. So, if employers find that employees are magically disappearing during working hours in an attempt to find the Gryffindor wearing the Death Eater Mask in the CEO's parking space, what must they do...

Managing the magic: How to wield your (employer) wand?

As with any potential distraction – be it mobile games, social media or even texting – there is a need for employees to exhibit a modicum of self-control. However, equally there needs to be effective management of behaviour where a lack of self-control could spiral into calamity...

In managing Wannabe Wizards, employers should –

1. Address it up front: You don't need to wheedle out all the wizards before telling your workforce that playing obsessively during working hours is not acceptable conduct. Make sure that employees know that you are aware of the game and will be taking steps to limit its impact on productivity.

2. Set boundaries: Tell employees what you deem to be 'acceptable use'. This might be to limit play to non-working time, ie lunch breaks; or ban the use of the app completely. The employer's approach should be measured against the potential impact on its business - if the app has gone viral and the entire workforce could benefit from Wizards Anonymous then perhaps a "cold turkey" ban would not go amiss. Embracing the game may also not be a bad idea – Friday afternoon drinks could turn into a buzzing event if a Harry-hooked workforce were invited to a 'Foundable Fiesta'.

3. Inform employees of the consequences: Alert employees to the fact that, where they are flouting workplace rules or neglecting their duties, there will be disciplinary action taken against them. The severity and frequency of the misconduct should inform the action taken. Where playing the game results or could potentially result in damage to person or property,

this would likely justify a harsher sanction than where the employee is taking a 90-minute lunch to visit the nearest Fortress.

4. Set an example: Managers should lead by example. Where managers seek to enforce rules to which they do not see themselves bound, employees are less likely to adhere to those rules. Having double standards may also affect team dynamics, especially if the manager is the first to skip work to visit the local Inn.

Whilst Wizards Unite might not bring your business to a standstill, it may result in a reduction in productivity until the fad subsides. Until then, employers should wrangle up their wizards and demystify the rules relating to workplace wizardry.

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