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Work & Money

from the March 08, 2004 edition

Can I take time off for Olympics?

Companies who support the training of their employee-athletes find it boosts worker morale and drive.

By **Jon Boroshok** | Contributor to *The Christian Science Monitor*

It's not the usual time-off request. But when would-be Olympians ask their employers for time off to train for running, rowing, or even judo, they're finding a surprisingly sympathetic response - even from small and midsize companies hit hard by downsizing and tough times.

Employee morale, it seems, still counts among employers.

Take Cindy Bishop. Late last year, the software engineer cautiously approached her boss at RSA Security in Bedford, Mass., to ask for a few months off to try out for the US women's rowing team. Like many tech companies, RSA has weathered tough times, including a falling stock price and downsizing.

But the company was a year beyond layoffs. That was "enough time and distance" to support Ms. Bishop's request, says Vivian Vitale, senior vice president of human resources at RSA, even though her leave has the potential to go well beyond the company's 90-day limit if she makes the team.

"For the period Cindy is out, the cost to the company is minimal," says Ms. Vitale. "For the time she is scheduled to be out, we will be covering the company contribution for her benefits only. The



SUPER ATHLETE: Judo Olympic medalist Jimmy Pedro is an Olympic hopeful. His firm, Monster Worldwide, supports his taking time off to train.

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maximum we can extend this leave is one year."

RSA will spend \$7,500 to sponsor Bishop's boat, bringing its total projected cost to \$15,000.

Bishop's Olympic efforts are delivering a return on investment in terms of better employee morale and corporate culture. "We're proud of this," Vitale says. "It's good for recruitment, and allows us to be a local employer of choice."

While RSA did not go out and recruit an Olympic hopeful, Medarex of Princeton, N.J., did. The healthcare firm, near Princeton University Lake where the rowing team is based, has become a recruiting ground for its president and CEO, Donald Drakeman.

"We look for a pool of very bright, well-educated, serious, hardworking people," Mr. Drakeman says, adding that elite athletes fit that profile and bring a drive and work ethic that meshes with the biotech's culture.

Research analyst Jason Flickinger is a 2004 Summer Olympics hopeful and Medarex's second employee Olympian. When he is not practicing with the rowing team, Flickinger puts in a 30-hour week at Medarex, working closely with Drakeman as well as with the CFO.

Flickinger does take time off for training, ranging from a few hours to several weeks, and is compensated accordingly. This season, Flickinger is taking a six- to seven-week leave to join the rowing team at its winter home in San Diego. He'll still get some work done via e-mail and a company-provided notebook computer.

Flickinger uses up paid vacation time first, followed by unpaid vacation. Like other Medarex employees, he has a 401(k) and stock-purchase plan. He's covered by a US Olympic Committee health-insurance program, so his benefits are uninterrupted.

Drakeman says Flickinger's breaks have worked out fine for the company. "We tend to have several people doing the same job, with some overlapping skills. They're kept busy, and the work has ebbs and flows," he says.

Flickinger says he's never felt resentment from co-workers who pick up the slack. "People are very accommodating to your training needs," he says. "You feel like you owe a lot to your employer."

Both Drakeman and Flickinger paint a picture of balanced give and take, and a team approach. "If he wins a world championship, that's pretty neat. We're proud of him," says Drakeman.

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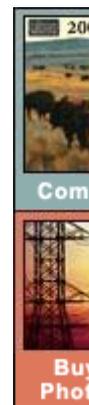
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Monster, a division of Monster Worldwide, has a three-time Olympic employee in Jimmy Pedro. A bronze medalist for Judo in the 1996 Olympics and a 1999 world champion, Mr. Pedro is also an Olympic hopeful this year.

Today as a manager of Monster's US Olympic Team sponsorship, his athletic interests and degree in economics from Brown University are helping Monster develop a website (TeamUSAnet) that will assist Olympians in their transition from competitive sports to the business world.

Monster provides Jimmy a full-time salary and benefits, while accommodating a flexible work schedule. His typical work week is three to four days, and he is usually out at least one to two-and-a-half weeks per month.

"I'm extremely grateful for what Monster is allowing me to do," Pedro says.

His co-workers seem happy about it. "We get the job done," says Doug Hall, director of marketing services. "Everybody is supportive of Jimmy and his quest. He helps bring the Olympic sponsorship to life for us."

Supporting an Olympic hopeful's efforts may conflict with today's do-more-with-less business credo, yet the firms that do so believe there is a positive return on the investment when it comes to worker morale and turning athletic drive into productivity.

"It's a good and right thing to do," says Vitale.



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