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Avoid the Christmas Party Headache – Tips for Employers

The popularity of the company Christmas party has varied over recent years, and clearly, the pandemic stopped many (although perhaps not all) types of festive social gatherings. For some organisations, the traditional annual get-together has already been retired as a thing of the past; for others, it will remain a highlight in the calendar.

Having organised events over the past few years with ever-changing pandemic guidelines to consider, this year, businesses have been planning their social events considering a 'cost of living' crisis and perhaps a more remote workforce.

Despite challenges, there are still many advantages to company social events, which can play an important part in rewarding employees and showing them they are valued. The annual staff event can be an opportunity for some businesses to recognise individual performance throughout the year, for example, by awarding prizes to employees for their achievements.

When employees feel valued, they are naturally more motivated, engaged, and willing to go the extra mile for their employer. Social interaction also helps to build solid teams and can promote cross-team working, improving communication throughout the wider company.

When organising a social event, the first question should be: what do your employees really want? Could a staff poll or questionnaire be used to gain insight before an event is planned? The more inclusive the occasion is, the more likely it will succeed in bringing teams together. You may find there is a preference for smaller events based around an activity or a meal, or perhaps the company-wide event is still something your employees look forward to.

Whatever type of social occasion you choose, it is essential to remember that employers have a duty of care for their staff during work-related events, whether they fall outside usual working hours or not.

We have all heard horror stories about Christmas party dramas, usually followed by headaches and regrets the following day. Some incidents have even led to formal disciplinary action and claims being dealt with in the Employment Tribunals. When alcohol is involved, there is a danger that any simmering quarrels and resentments will come to the surface, and things may be said or done that are later regretted.

With an increasing focus on protecting employees from harassment, employers will want to ensure that their staff are protected from inappropriate behaviour and that the company's reputation is not put at risk.

Here are some helpful tips to avoid this party season being more of a headache than it should be:

Before the event

- Ensure your policies, including expenses and social media, are current and set general expectations around behaviour.
- Ensure the chosen venue suits your needs and the access needs of all your employees.
- Carry out a risk assessment before the event to avoid anyone having to conspicuously 'police' health and safety on the day itself.
- Avoid the potential risk of anyone driving after drinking alcohol by setting a clear finish time for the event allowing employees to arrange lifts/taxis well in advance. This is particularly important if your venue is remote or not serviced easily by public transport, in this case, you may wish to arrange transportation to and from the venue for all your employees.
- Select entertainment carefully to ensure it won't cause offence.
- If you are serving alcohol, consider providing food too, and always ensure that soft drinks are freely available throughout the event.
- Underage employees should not be permitted to purchase alcohol, and others should be made aware that they are not allowed to buy alcohol on behalf of underage employees.
- Check for allergies or dietary requirements well beforehand to ensure the event is as inclusive as possible.
- Don't forget to invite all your employees, including those working remotely, on leave, full-time and part-time.
- Don't make attendance compulsory. Remember that despite your efforts, not all events will appeal to all your staff, and some prefer to keep their home and work lives separate.
- Your social media policy should be clear about your expectations around confidentiality and using personal social media accounts for work-related posts.

- Hold regular training sessions throughout the year in 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion', 'Anti-Harassment and Bullying' and 'Dignity at Work', and ensure your employees know how the principles relate to your values and expectations as a business.

During the event

- Avoid an unlimited free bar; consider a voucher system for alcoholic drinks.
- If you are using the event as an opportunity to present awards to staff, include those not attending. Prizes can be given out to staff who are not present at another time – non-attendance at a social event should not be seen as a lack of engagement or commitment to the business.
- Consider allowing employees to sit and socialise with whoever they choose at the event rather than seeing this as an opportunity to force or encourage the resolution of any issues.
- If you see inappropriate behaviour at the event, do not allow it to continue, and speak to those involved as soon as possible.
- Don't use the event as an opportunity to gossip – confidentiality doesn't stop at the office door.
- Avoid hanging out the mistletoe and avoid drunken promises of promotions or pay rises; they may be held to be binding!

Where an event is allowed to extend beyond what was planned and move into an unofficial 'after-party', that can be where the real issues arise. As suggested above, sticking to a definite finish time and informing the venue when you expect to leave their premises can be helpful. Allocating someone with authority to assist at the end of the event can also help keep things under control and ensure your staff get home safely.

If, despite all your efforts, you are faced with an employee grievance because of a work social event, take this seriously and comply with your policies when handling it. Even though the behaviour may have occurred outside of work, you will need to investigate thoroughly and ensure that you consider all available evidence in the same way as if it had happened in the workplace.

It can be beneficial to involve an independent person to handle investigations or disciplinary matters if the people who usually handle such matters were also present at the event. Should the investigation process conclude that there is a case to answer, use your disciplinary policy as a basis for handling the matter formally.

Matters should be handled sensitively and confidentially, and you must be consistent and fair in deciding on the outcomes.

Having said all the above, and whatever they look like in your particular business, parties and social events remain an important part of the work calendar and provide a sense of belonging. Company-wide events can be the perfect opportunity to recognise the contribution of all your employees, some of whom you may not have been able to thank in person over recent years. Have fun and enjoy the festive season!

Need further advice?

If you would like advice and assistance with supporting your employees, please do not hesitate to contact [Emma Starmer](#) or any other member of the [Employment Team](#) by emailing online.enquiries@la-law.com.