

Office Party Planning: Celebrate Good Times With Round of Good Party Parameters

One of the most important things to consider when planning the holiday party is how to limit the consumption of alcohol by party-going employees.

As the year draws to a close, many employers are likely planning holiday or year-end parties for their employees. While such parties should go smoothly, if an employer doesn't approach it properly, throwing a holiday party can be like poking a sleeping tiger.

“There are several issues that could implicate federal and state laws,” said Brian McDermott, a shareholder at the law firm Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart. “The major issues are potential religious discrimination issues, wage-and-hour issues, social-host liability, and sex harassment — those are common results of holiday parties gone bad.”

Even workers' compensation claims can arise from unfortunate incidents at holiday parties, McDermott said.

Overconsumption of alcohol can be a catalyst for legal claims by employees against employers.

Holiday Party Checklist

Here are guidelines to ensure your holiday party is successful and reduces your risk of running into legal trouble.

- Before your holiday party kicks off, circulate and communicate expectations for employee behavior.
- Decide whether you want to serve employees alcohol during your party.
- If there is going to be alcohol, consider only offering beer and wine. It may be a good idea to have a cash bar that closes intermittently and early. It's also recommended that employees are only given two free drink tickets.
- Consider arranging transportation for employees through taxis or shuttle services. Providing hotel rooms is an option, too.
- Discourage after-parties where more drinking could take place.

Source: *Workforce* reporting

“You give a person a few drinks and they turn into somebody else sometimes,” said Susan Heathfield, a human resources consultant and curator of the About.com HR page.

Sixty-one percent of employers planned to serve alcohol during their holiday or end-of-year parties, according to a 2012 Society for Human Resource Management survey, and only 51 percent said they planned to regulate employees' consumption.

One of the most important things to consider when planning the holiday party is how to limit the consumption of alcohol by party-going employees. It's also highly important for employers to clearly communicate policies and behavioral expectations for holiday parties. In doing so, employers can limit their liability in charges of sexual harassment or even drunken-driving instances, experts advise.

“So as long as employers take reasonable steps in advance for the holiday party, most courts will give them a fair shake in litigation,” McDermott said.

Offering only two drink tickets to employees or having a cash bar and closing it early are examples of how an employer could limit access to alcohol. Only providing beer and wine also works.

If there's going to be alcohol served at the party, experts suggest providing hotel accommodations for employees or assisting with transportation home by arranging taxis or shuttle services.