



FIVE KEY STEPS TO PROTECT YOUR BUSINESS WHEN PLANNING YOUR CHRISTMAS PARTY



If you are planning to hold a Christmas celebration office party this year, it is important to remember some key rules. For the unprepared employer, these types of events can turn out to be a nightmare. Liberal amounts of alcohol lead to allegations of sexual harassment, disciplinary proceedings for violence or other unacceptable conduct and certain demotivated members of staff as a result. Before they know it, companies can end up with time consuming and costly employment disputes. Instead of working on improving the

bottom line, managers become sidetracked into wasting resources on issues that add nothing to the business.

With some careful thought and planning, however, you can minimise the risk of problems arising in your business, without spoiling the fun.

Here are five steps to bear in mind:

- **STEP 1:** Remember your obligations to safeguard health and safety. Budgets are tight this year and you may be holding a Christmas party in the office. Think about having some areas of the office out of bounds so as to remove any obvious temptations for mischief. Photocopying rooms should be firmly locked!
- **STEP 2:** You may have your party at a venue away from the office. Remember that an office Christmas party is work related, wherever it is held. As such, employers are likely to be vicariously liable for their employees' actions. You should set out beforehand what type of behaviour you regard as acceptable. Remind staff that the company's normal rules, policies and procedures relating to conduct apply. Make it clear that a breach of those rules will be treated as misconduct and will be dealt with via your company's disciplinary procedure.
- **STEP 3:** You may well have a diverse workforce, with various cultural and religious beliefs. As Christmas is a Christian celebration, employees who do not wish to attend Christmas parties on religious grounds should not be made to feel under pressure to go.
- **STEP 4:** If you are planning to hold an event out of normal work hours, some employees may have family responsibilities that will prevent them from going to the party. Again, it is important that they are not put under any pressure to attend.

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- **STEP 5:** If the Christmas party is to be held during the week and you expect staff to be in work the next day, you should provide plenty of non-alcoholic drinks and food. Your party policy statement issued beforehand should make it clear that a failure to turn up for work following the party without a reasonable explanation could be treated as a disciplinary matter.

And what should your party policy statement contain? It is useful to have a policy that could be used for any company-related social activities. Once introduced, there is no harm done by drawing the attention of staff to it by email in the period running up to the event. Appropriate items to include in the policy are:

- An introduction to confirm that social events are intended to be friendly and informal
- A statement that the company expects each member of staff to be professional and respectful of their colleagues and guests at all times
- A statement so that each individual can enjoy the event safely, all staff should recognise their limits in relation to the consumption of alcohol
- That staff should make legal, appropriate and safe arrangements for transport home in advance of the event
- That any misconduct, discriminatory behaviour or breaches of health and safety requirements will be viewed seriously by the company and may result in formal action being taken in line with the company's disciplinary procedure.

To avoid the email reminder to staff being too negative, take care in the drafting. For example, set out the fact that the company recognises that the event is intended to be an enjoyable social occasion and that the policy has been introduced with a view to reminding staff of the importance of safeguarding health and safety and respectful behaviour.

If you require any specific advice in connection with the material contained in this bulletin, or on any other Employment Law issues, please contact: Paul Chamberlain in Manchester on 0161 836 8864, Andrew Cross in Liverpool on 0151 600 3062 or Kevin James in Preston on 01772 229847.

If you wish to receive the bulletin please let us know by contacting Liz Fox at: Liz.Fox@brabnerscs.com
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