DEI in Action: Inclusive Holiday and Event Planning



Summer and the back-to-school season are often filled with opportunities for workplace celebrations. Company barbecues, family picnics, volunteer days, charity fundraisers, cultural festivals, employee appreciation events, sports tournaments, and back-to-school drives can strengthen relationships and boost morale. These gatherings help employees connect outside their day-to-day responsibilities and contribute to a positive workplace culture.

However, even well-intentioned events can unintentionally exclude employees if they do not consider the diverse backgrounds, abilities, family responsibilities, cultural traditions, and religious practices represented within today's workforce. For HR directors and workplace managers, inclusive event planning is an important part of creating a workplace where every employee feels welcomed, respected, and able to participate on their own terms.

Rather than assuming one type of event appeals to everyone, organizations should strive to design celebrations that remove barriers and provide meaningful opportunities for inclusion.

Recognizing the Diversity Within Your Workforce

North American workplaces are more diverse than ever. Employees may come from different cultural backgrounds, practice different religions, have disabilities, speak different first languages, observe dietary restrictions, care for young children or aging parents, or simply have different comfort levels with social activities.

Summer and early autumn also coincide with a variety of cultural and religious observances. Depending on the year, organizations may encounter events such as Indigenous cultural celebrations, Pride events, Eid, Rosh Hashanah, seasonal harvest festivals, Diwali planning, or preparations for other significant religious and cultural holidays. Employees may also be participating in community festivals, volunteering, or family traditions that are important to them.

Recognizing this diversity helps employers avoid planning activities that unintentionally conflict with important observances or leave some employees feeling excluded.

Plan With Inclusion From the Beginning

Inclusive events are most successful when accessibility and belonging are considered during the planning stage rather than added afterward.

When organizing workplace events, HR and management should consider questions such as:

- Is the venue physically accessible?
- Are there food options that accommodate allergies, religious dietary requirements, and vegetarian or vegan preferences?
- Will employees with mobility, hearing, or visual disabilities be able to participate comfortably?
- Does the event occur during a significant religious or cultural observance?
- Are activities suitable for employees of different ages, physical abilities, and comfort levels?
- Is transportation available if the location is difficult to reach?

Seeking employee feedback before planning major events can also help identify barriers that organizers may not have anticipated.

Think Beyond Traditional Workplace Celebrations

Many organizations default to similar annual activities such as golf tournaments, sporting events, or evening receptions. While these events may appeal to many employees, they should not become the only opportunities for networking or recognition.

Offering a variety of activities throughout the year creates more opportunities for everyone to participate. For example, organizations might alternate between:

- Family-friendly picnics or barbecues.
- Volunteer or community service days.
- Charity fundraising activities.
- Lunch-and-learn sessions celebrating different cultures.
- Outdoor wellness walks or fitness challenges.
- Employee appreciation breakfasts or lunches.
- Back-to-school donation drives supporting local communities.

Providing different types of events recognizes that employees have varying interests, schedules, and personal commitments.

Accommodating Cultural and Religious Needs

Accommodation means making reasonable efforts to ensure employees can participate without compromising their beliefs or personal needs.

Simple accommodations can make a significant difference, including:

- Providing clearly labelled food options that accommodate religious and dietary restrictions.
- Scheduling events at times that avoid known religious observances where reasonably possible.
- Offering alcohol-free beverages and activities that do not centre around drinking.
- Providing quiet spaces for prayer, reflection, or employees who need a break

from large gatherings.
- Ensuring invitations and event materials use inclusive language that welcomes everyone.

Managers should also recognize that some employees may decline invitations because of sincerely held religious beliefs, family responsibilities, health concerns, or personal preferences. These decisions should always be respected.

Make Participation Truly Optional

One of the most important aspects of inclusive event planning is ensuring employees never feel pressured to attend.

Although organizations often describe events as “optional,” employees may receive mixed messages if promotions, networking opportunities, or leadership visibility seem tied to attendance. Similarly, repeated comments about who “supports the team” by attending social functions can create unnecessary pressure.

Managers should clearly communicate that:

- Attendance is voluntary.
- Choosing not to attend will not affect performance evaluations, advancement opportunities, or workplace relationships.
- Employees are not expected to explain why they decline.
- Alternative opportunities for recognition, networking, and team building are available.

Leaders play an important role by respecting employees’ decisions without questioning or criticizing their absence.

Consider After-Hours Events Carefully

Many workplace celebrations take place after regular working hours. While convenient for some employees, evening and weekend events can present barriers for others.

Employees may have caregiving responsibilities, religious commitments, second jobs, transportation challenges, or simply need personal time to recharge. Scheduling every social event outside normal working hours may unintentionally exclude valuable members of the team.

Whenever possible, consider holding some events during the workday or offering multiple participation options. Rotating event times throughout the year helps ensure different groups of employees have opportunities to participate.

Ask for Feedback and Keep Improving

Creating inclusive events is an ongoing process rather than a one-time initiative. After major workplace celebrations, HR can gather anonymous feedback to understand what worked well and where improvements can be made.

Questions might include whether employees felt welcomed, whether accommodations met their needs, whether event timing was convenient, and whether they have ideas for future activities. Listening to employee feedback demonstrates a genuine commitment to inclusion and helps organizations continually refine their approach.

Building Belonging Through Inclusive Planning

Workplace events should strengthen connections, not create barriers. By thoughtfully considering accessibility, cultural and religious diversity, family responsibilities, and individual preferences, organizations can create celebrations that employees genuinely enjoy and feel comfortable attending.

For HR directors and workplace managers, inclusive event planning is about more than organizing successful gatherings. It is an opportunity to demonstrate that every employee belongs, regardless of their background or circumstances. When participation is voluntary, accommodations are thoughtfully considered, and diverse perspectives are welcomed, workplace events become meaningful experiences that foster trust, engagement, and a culture where inclusion is put into action every day.