

# Holiday Party Best Practices: A Guide For Employers



The holiday season is a time for people to come together and celebrate. For many of us, this may include workplace parties. With seasonal festivities and holidays just around the corner, it's that time of year again to consider the proactive steps employers can take to ensure the health and safety of employees who attend office parties or other celebrations.

In this *FTR Now*, we are pleased to bring you our annual checklist of potential measures to help plan a safe holiday celebration for all.

## **Understanding Employer Liability**

Workplace celebrations can be a positive team-building experience, but they can also attract liability for employers. Courts have signalled that employers may be held at least partially responsible for negative consequences and damages flowing from their work-related social gatherings.

For example, should an intoxicated employee drive home following a workplace party, the employer may face liability for any related injury to the employee or to an innocent third party. Liability may also arise where employees or their guests at a workplace function engage in unacceptable behaviours such as sexual harassment or discriminatory conduct.

The Workplace Safety and Insurance Appeals Tribunal has considered workplace functions and in one case found that an injury suffered by an employee during a game at a holiday party was a compensable injury.

This potential liability does not mean that employers need to stop hosting workplace functions, but they must be aware of the possible safety-related liability associated with their events and be proactive in managing the associated risks.

## **Holiday Celebration Checklist**

### **Health and Safety Measures**

Prudent employers will want to put in place the following health and safety measures:

- In the lead-up to the event, set consistent expectations for behaviour and remind employees that all workplace rules and policies remain in effect during

the event for both employees and their guests, including with respect to harassment, sexual harassment, workplace violence, and health and safety precautions. Where applicable, draw their attention to any policies that prohibit cannabis and/or alcohol use during work-related functions.

- Reinforce to employees that they are responsible for the behaviours of their guests and must ensure their guests comply with all of the policies and protocols for the event.
- Ensure employees are familiar with the harassment-reporting procedure and are comfortable coming forward with any complaints.
- Do not have any games, activities or decorations that could encourage inappropriate behaviours or workplace injury (e.g., hanging mistletoe, excessive alcohol use).

## **Alcohol Consumption**

If your celebration will include the consumption of alcohol, consider adopting the following safety-enhancing measures.

### **Before the Event**

- Inform employees and guests that they are not to drink and drive.
- Plan to provide a supervised limited bar and serve food.
- Arrange for a trained third party to tend the bar and serve the drinks to employees and guests (they can monitor consumption and/or impairment).
- Set up alternative transportation options for employees and guests prior to the party and be sure to communicate those options clearly to employees.
- Consider establishing carpools with designated drivers who agree not to drink at the event.
- Assist in arranging for hotel rooms for employees who live far from the event, perhaps by arranging a reduced rate with a nearby hotel.

### **At the Event**

- Provide taxi chits to employees at the outset of the event and designate employees to proactively distribute additional chits as necessary.
- Remind employees and guests that they should not drink and drive.
- Close the bar an hour or more before the party ends.
- Designate an appropriate employee to monitor employees' alcohol consumption and to deal with circumstances in which an employee appears to be impaired and/or intoxicated.
- Consider utilizing a ticket system to limit the number of drinks an employee or other guest may be served during the party.

## **Dealing With Intoxicated Employees**

Even when employers take positive steps to limit impairment, some employees may still become intoxicated. If employers identify intoxicated employees or guests, they should take positive steps to ensure that the intoxicated person is not driving.

- Consider implementing a system whereby employees and guests leave their car keys with an attendant at the start of the evening instead of having to remove keys from an intoxicated person later in the evening.
- Arrange to have a sober co-worker drive the intoxicated person home.
- Call the intoxicated person's emergency contact (don't just offer to do so).
- Insist that the intoxicated person take a cab and pay for the trip.
- If all else fails, and the intoxicated person insists on driving impaired, call for police assistance.

## **Consideration of Religious and Disability-Related Needs**

Successful workplace celebrations begin with thoughtful planning that considers the diverse needs of all employees.

- When selecting an event date, consider potential conflicts with religious observances and cultural celebrations and ensure the menu selected incorporates options for various dietary requirements.
- Consider accessibility when selecting a venue. The chosen location should accommodate all employees comfortably, with features such as wheelchair access and accessible washrooms.

## **Conclusion**

Successful holiday celebrations require careful planning and proactive risk management. By implementing these guidelines, employers can create enjoyable events while fulfilling their duty of care to employees and guests. We wish you and your employees an enjoyable and safe holiday season.

*The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.*

Find out more and explore further thought leadership around [Employment Law and Labour Law](#).

Author: [Victoria McCorkindale](#)

Hicks Morley