Jingle All The Way To A Smooth Holiday Party: A Checklist For Employers



An office holiday party is a wonderful way to celebrate the end of the year, recognize employees for their hard work, and offer a chance for colleagues to socialize and connect. This is particularly meaningful as in-person gatherings become more common following COVID-19. However, without proper precautions, a workplace event can spiral out of control and expose employers to unexpected liabilities.

It's important to remember that both the *Human Rights Code* and Occupational Health and Safety legislation in many Canadian jurisdictions create statutory obligations on employers to ensure a safe workplace for their employees, which includes workplace events such as holiday parties. These obligations relate to protecting employees during and after such gatherings and include ensuring a harassment-free environment. As a result, employers may be held responsible for the actions of their employees during a holiday party and afterwards, including for any inappropriate behavior, such as harassment, sexual harassment, or employees driving while intoxicated after the event.

To avoid such liabilities, CCPartners has compiled a list of suggested "best practices" to assist your organization in planning and hosting a safe and inclusive holiday event:

1. Hold an alcohol-free and cannabis-free event. This is a low-risk option for employers. Event planners should check with the event facility to see what their policies on cannabis use are in advance of the party. But don't forget that cannabis comes in many forms so consideration will need to be given to whether you allow your guests to consume any form of cannabis on site.
2. If you decide to provide alcohol at the event, have a cash bar, hire licensed bartenders, and speak to employees before the event about the risks of over-drinking.
3. If you allow cannabis products to be available, make sure you have a means of controlling consumption in the same manner as alcohol and only provide products from a legal dispensary.
4. Employees should also be reminded that this is a workplace function and they are expected to behave in a way that is not harassing, discriminatory, intimidating or otherwise inappropriate, and that your workplace violence and harassment policies apply to the holiday party.
5. Consider distributing your workplace harassment policy to all guests in advance and have them sign off that they have read and understood same.

6. Do not have any games or decoration that could lead to inappropriate behaviors (ex. hanging mistletoe).
7. Holding a morning (brunch) event rather than an evening event where alcohol is served may reduce the consumption of alcohol.
8. Provide non-alcoholic drinks as an option.
9. Avoid serving alcohol and allowing consumption of cannabis if your event includes physical activities.
10. Have plenty of food available throughout the party, and accommodate diverse palates including for those with food allergies or sensitivities.
11. Provide alternative transportation for employees (i.e. taxi chits or Uber reimbursement). Encourage employees before the event to leave their vehicles at home and take advantage of the alternative transportation you are providing to get to and from the event.
12. Arrange for a nearby hotel to have rooms available for employees who are unable to get home.
13. Stop serving alcohol and making cannabis products available at least an hour before the party is over.
14. Event organizers should have some training or otherwise inform themselves on detecting intoxication from alcohol and cannabis.
15. Be respectful of the different cultural and belief systems among your employees when planning your event. Make sure the date of your event, your menu and activities reflect your workforce's religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity.
16. Where your workforce is culturally diverse, consider creating a holiday planning committee of representative employees to plan your event, and plan your event around the many religious holidays being celebrated around this time.
17. Consider inviting your employees' family to accommodate those who may be unable to leave young children at home.
18. Allow employees to opt out of your holiday event without a consequence or negative connotation.
19. Make sure the venue is accessible to those attending your event.
20. Consider creating an electronic-free event, where use of cell phones and other mobile/recording devices are limited. This will help to ensure that your event and your employees don't end up on social media.

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.

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