Should I Do an Office Christmas Party or Not?

written by vickyp | November 22, 2021

Last year a study of 189 companies across industries conducted by outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, found that only 23% said they would be marking the end of the year in some way. Among that 23%, almost three quarters said it would be some kind of virtual event — through Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, or whatever the company's video conferencing program of choice may be.

Fast forward a full year and with the delta variant surge across the country, vaccine mandates and unvaccinated culture wars, more and more companies are delaying their return to the office and there's a very understandable general hesitancy towards getting together in crowds again. It's hard to believe that the first half of summer 2021 was full of optimism and openings, but the fall has seen regional surges, breakthrough infections, and more.

We all could use some holiday spirit right about now, and you are probably like 85% of HR managers (according to SHRM), looking to have some type of office/workplace gathering this year — because, understandably, there is a lot of Zoom fatigue by now. It doesn't matter how great your internet connection is — video chatting just isn't the same as face-to-face socializing, and sitting at home in front of your computer is a far cry from a party at a venue where there's a DJ and a dance floor.

Did you know?

A survey of 3,000 people by Olivet Nazarene University found that 41% of people categorized those they worked with simply as "coworkers," while 20% said they were "only-at-work friends." Only 15% answered that some of their coworkers were "real friends." And yet, while some of us may keep our work relationships at a distance, it's undeniable that during quarantine we've been lonely and longing for more connection, not less. (Goodbye to Office Holiday Parties, Whizy Kim)

What are my liabilities?

In most jurisdictions, small gatherings are now considered safe with certain COVID protocols (consult your local Health authority). Today, our knowledge and experience with COVID have evolved from near obsessive-compulsive cleaning to more science-based hygiene and ventilation safety protocols — and although I cannot say you SHOULD be having an in-person event this year, I can say that you SHOULDN'T be afraid to, just be smart about it and maybe don't rush towards a team-building hug-a-thon.

Even without the shadow of COVID, your holiday event can be a liability nightmare, so you need to consider the following while planning and factoring in the best COVID safety protocols:

Will you serve alcohol? If so, how are you limiting? What considerations are you making for transportation?
Where and when are you hosting the event? Late afternoon events at the workplace remind employees that the event is still professional and not a frat party… usually.
Is everyone included? We are in an age of hybrid work arrangements beyond IDE necessities — how are you going to build up the TEAM morale and have everyone participate?
Is it worth the risks? Obviously, there are COVID concerns with public gatherings, large and small, that need to be factored into your planning. But if you reason for having an office party is to build up morale and reward employees, you have other less-risky options like gifts, paid time off, charitable donations that might have the same or a better net effect.
2021 hasn't been the year we hoped for at this time in 2020. The reality is that this pandemic is transitioning to an endemic, and COVID-19 will be a part of our lives for a very long time. We need to look at how that effects workplaces and work relationships moving forward so that 2022 isn't a year of fingers crossed that things will "go back to normal." I don't mean that from a doom and gloom perspective — it isn't — it's just different, and HR managers/directors/leaders are instrumental in keeping morale, productivity, and safety aligned and prospering.