

Planning a Holiday Party? Read This First

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Every few years I write a brief article about planning workplace gatherings and each time I do so, I think to myself, “Surely this is all old news and no one *really* needs this information anymore?” And then I get that morning-after call or an email from a client who had an issue at their office party reminding me that while certain workplace trends come and go, the potential for an office party “incident” is timeless. So, what can human resources professionals do to minimize risk?

1. **Monitor and Limit (or Eliminate!) Alcohol Consumption.** We recommend that companies avoid offering an open bar and instead provide drink tickets for a limited number of alcoholic drinks. At a minimum, all servers should have the necessary certifications to serve alcohol (Smart Serve in Ontario, Serving It Right in BC and ProServe in Alberta). You may also want to consider an alcohol-free daytime activity or gathering that includes employees’ spouses or children rather than hosting an evening event.
2. **Know Your People.** In every workplace there are both designated and natural leaders and, sadly, a few persistent rogues. Talk to your leaders ahead of time about your expectations for the party and encourage them to model good behaviour and, if necessary, ensure that people who have managed to over-consume get home safely. If you know that there is that one person who will inevitably drink too much or behave inappropriately, speak to them in advance and put them on notice that bad behaviour will not be tolerated. In extreme cases, just “uninvite” them. No one has the right to make other people uncomfortable at workplace gatherings.
3. **Consider COVID.** As much as we would all like to believe that the pandemic is behind us, holiday party season coincides with a general rise in COVID-19 infections and other respiratory illnesses. We recommend sending out a reminder to party attendees that anyone with symptoms or who recently tested positive for COVID-19 must refrain from attending. You may also want to make it clear that people are welcome to mask if it makes them feel more comfortable in a crowded environment.
4. **Remember Accessibility & Focus on Inclusion.** Parties should be fun for everyone. When selecting a venue, make sure that it is accessible to those with physical limitations. If you have guests with accommodation requirements (whether physical or dietary), reach out to the venue in advance to put it on notice of those requirements and ensure that it is ready to welcome all of your guests.
5. **Get Your People Home Safely.** This is especially critical if you are hosting an event where alcohol is being served. We recommend having a responsible member of management or the human resources team stick around to make sure that the company’s bar tab is closed appropriately (i.e., before someone gets the bright idea to order shots) and all of your employees are safely bundled

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into taxis or have a sober ride home at the end of the night.

6. **Have Fun?** Just kidding. HR doesn't get to have fun at these things.

This publication is a general summary of the law. It does not replace legal advice tailored to your specific circumstances.