

**Love it or loathe it, the work Christmas party season is again upon us. Veronica Miller puts down her mince pie long enough to offer some sage advice on how to make it through relatively unscathed.**

# Xmas

*tying you up in knots?*

**F**orget Iraq, the office Christmas party is the event that divides a nation. Some people love it – it's the highlight of their work social year, and they look forward to the party from the moment they recover from the last one. The more cynical and jaded among us think office parties are the vilest form of torture ever devised by senior management. Regardless of which camp you sit in, the Christmas season is upon us, and this means the party is nigh.

#### **Party organiser extraordinaire**

This year, you've been blessed – or lumbered, depending on your viewpoint – with the task of organising the work Christmas event. You can view this in one of two ways. Either it is a compliment on your social and organisational skills and a reflection on the trust placed in your style and sophistication; or you're the mug who doesn't know how to say no, in which case this could be a subject for New Year's if you're short on resolutions.

The pressure mounts regardless and you've got a few short weeks until all eyes are on you. Where do you even begin?

#### **Cost**

If the company is paying for the event, HMRC will allow a tax-free cost of £150 per attendee, including VAT. Go over this, and your employees will be charged tax on the party as a benefit in kind. This cost is a total for the year, so if you held other events during the year, best get a total or sign a PAYE Settlement Agreement, or the baubles may lose some of their sheen.

If the company isn't stumping up the cost, remember not everyone earns executive pay. One of the biggest gripes at this time of year is from people who feel the size of their pay packet is ignored when these events are planned. While some might think £50 is but a mere drop, for others, this is a week's groceries. You don't have to go cheap and cheerful, but conducting a quick straw poll of what people are comfortable paying is a considerate place to start.

#### **Venue**

Where, oh where to have the office party of the year? The best advice is: be practical. No matter how outstanding

a venue might be, if it is the far end of nowhere, people aren't going to love you. Worse, they may not show up. There should be access to ample public transport, and if there isn't, make sure you can get people to it on buses, in cabs, and so forth (the cost of which must be included in the £150 limit).

#### **The theme**

Ahh, the Christmas party theme, beloved of party organisers everywhere. This is a decision fraught with danger. You will never please everyone (see above re: cynics) so the question becomes, do you treat the idea like Ebola and avoid it in much the same way? Or do you side with those who fervently believe that a party just isn't a party without a theme? Whatever you decide, my advice is: do it with conviction.

#### **The invitations**

If you decide to extend the invitation to partners of your employees, remember to be inclusive. Don't just invite husbands and wives, but also partners, including same-sex partners. If you fail to include everyone, you could face a valid discrimination claim on the grounds of sexual preference.

#### **Let's get this party started**

Christmas parties may be a non-starter, according to recent research by Croner, which suggests that nine out of ten bosses plan to cancel the Chrissie bash. Before you nay-sayers cheer, these statistics fly around every year and are contradicted by research from *IRS Employment Review*, which found that 77 per cent of employers were planning on holding a knees-up to celebrate the festive season. However, they do reflect a very real concern of companies that, in this litigious era when people have their lawyers on speed-dial, if something does go wrong, there will be more than hell to pay. The advice to employers is meted out each year, and while I hope the repetition won't send you to sleep in your eggnog, it is important that employers keep the following in mind.

#### **Employees behaving badly**

Make sure your employees know what is regarded as acceptable behaviour. And that locking the office geek in a storage



cupboard isn't it. The Christmas party is an extension of the office, regardless of location, and the same rules apply.

#### **For the health of all**

Conduct a health and safety check of the venue – drunk people are clumsy people. Many an evening ends with a UDI (unidentified drinking injury), and your liability for the safety of your staff may extend to the party. So mulled wine warmed over open flames, while terribly festive, probably isn't the wisest idea.

#### **Curb your enthusiasm**

It happens every year, without fail, but make sure your managers curb their tongues and don't make promises of a promotion or pay rise while under the influence. While the manager may not remember any promises, you can bet your bottom dollar the employee will – and will expect them to be kept. There is a time and a place for appraisals, and conducting one while slouching on a barstool and peering intensely over a wine glass isn't it.

#### **True romance**

If there is one thing that is true and sacred in this world, it is that with wine comes romantic entanglement. If your company frowns upon your employees entangling with each other, now would be the time to reiterate the policy. Otherwise you could end up with a very uncomfortable situation in the morning, when the words barn door, horse and bolted may spring to mind.

Although the UK isn't as paranoid as the US when it comes to sexual harassment in the office, this isn't because it doesn't happen. Younger staff especially may feel uncomfortable and out of their depth when faced with unwanted attention. Or react inappropriately. It is a good idea to remind everyone of what is and isn't acceptable behaviour before someone makes an unwise play for whomever has caught their eye.

#### **Free for all**

Unlimited free booze may cause serious problems. To paraphrase *Field of Dreams*, if it is there, people will drink. You might want to consider limiting alcohol to a couple of glasses of wine or beer rather than having an open bar – it

could prevent serious headaches later on, figuratively and literally.

Do not forget young Sam, the office junior. If you have people working for you who are under the legal drinking age, you are legally responsible for them. If you serve them alcohol, you are breaking a very serious law.

#### **On the way home**

Unless you make the event alcohol-free (snore), some people are going to be making their way home on the other side of mildly inebriated. Ensure cabs or cab phone numbers are available. Alternatively, provide a mini-bus or finish the party up before the trains and/or Tube stop running.

#### **The morning after the night before**

Be gentle. There will be sore heads and bellies, and if the company stocked the party with booze, it holds some of the responsibility for the state of its staff. It is, after all, the season of goodwill.

While your goodwill may extend to a little tardiness, ensure your staff know that you do, as a matter of fact, expect them to show up the next day. Failure to come to work can be construed as an offence requiring disciplinary action.

If any of your employees are operating dangerous machinery, it might be wise to have planned alternative work for those who might be *non compos mentis*.

#### **The aftermath**

Sometimes there will be incidents that will need to be dealt with the next day. Perhaps there was a fight, or someone played a prank that went wrong.

Regardless of who misbehaved, deal with any transgressions swiftly and to the letter of your company disciplinary procedure, regardless of the identity of the offender. Allowing senior managers or directors to get away with behaviour for which other staff are reprimanded will foster a culture of suspicion and distrust. Hardly the peace and joy one hopes for at this time of year.

If you do need to discipline a staff member, a representative from HR should be involved to avoid confusion and any potential unfair dismissal claims.

In the end, the office Christmas party only happens once a year. Enjoy it. Go on, you know you want to.