

HR Insights

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Workplace Parties During the 2021 Holiday Season

Many employees look forward to year-end workplace holiday celebrations. These events allow employees to celebrate with their colleagues and sometimes even family and guests. Importantly, these celebrations can also be a great way to drive employee engagement. While these events are often a long-standing company tradition, many organizations canceled holiday parties last year or found ways to connect virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article explores the current state of companies' plans for year-end events and offers general best practices for in-person, virtual and alternative ways to celebrate this holiday season.

The State of Pandemic Holiday Parties

This year, holiday parties—including in-person celebrations—may be making a comeback. Some key COVID-19 vaccine developments like widespread vaccine availability and workplace vaccine mandates may be driving change in the second holiday season of the pandemic.

According to the firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc., which conducts an annual workplace holiday party survey, more employers plan to host an in-person party this year than in 2020. The survey found that:

- Nearly 27% of companies plan to hold an in-person holiday party this year, up from just 5% in 2020. Before the pandemic, three-quarters of companies had in-person holiday parties.

- Approximately 7% of companies plan to host virtual events this year, down from 17% last year.
- Almost 35% of companies won't hold any type of event this year, which decreased from 55% last year.
- Roughly 22% of companies are unsure what their plans will be this holiday season.

These findings indicate that many organizations are still determining if they'll host a party this year, and if so, whether it will be an in-person or virtual celebration.

General Party Considerations

Holiday parties can positively impact the workplace by boosting employee motivation and engagement and overall team camaraderie. Events can give employees a break from the standard workday and serve as an informal company meeting that instills company values.

Holiday parties also remain a risk for employers—but employers can mitigate undesirable outcomes through effective planning. Regardless of the celebration type, there are some general best practices for employers to keep in mind when planning and hosting a year-end celebration:

- **Ask for input.** It may be worth surveying employees to see what type of celebrations or activities they'd be interested in this year.
- **Choose a neutral party theme.** Focusing on offering a broader "holiday party" while avoiding specific religious celebrations can be inclusive to employees of varying backgrounds and beliefs. Employers can use a year-end event to recognize and celebrate employees' hard work and accomplishments throughout the pandemic.
- **Evaluate your policies.** Ensure your employee handbook and policies are up to date and address requirements and behaviors to help mitigate safety risks. All employees should have easy access to a workplace handbook and policies. Employers should also consult with local legal counsel about any policy changes.
- **Set behavior expectations.** Unfortunately, holiday parties can lead to inappropriate behaviors by attendees. There are common concerns such as excessive alcohol consumption for on-site and even virtual celebrations, but employers can take steps to mitigate risks. Reiterate that any type of holiday celebration is considered a workplace event, meaning that all behaviors are expected to comply with documented organizational policies.
- **Make events optional.** Additionally, while many employees will be excited about a celebration, others may feel different due to the ongoing threat of COVID-19. With this in mind, it may be easier to make attendance optional.

Despite the pandemic, there are still ways to celebrate the holiday season as a company. It'll just require in-depth thought and planning—and some extra creativity.

In-person Party Considerations

While many employers opt for an in-person event this year, a pandemic gathering still requires careful planning. When it comes to hosting in-person holiday celebrations, there are some additional best practices to keep in mind:

- **Monitor local, state and federal guidelines.** A designated team should continually monitor COVID-

19 guidance to ensure the organization complies with and follows recommended protocols.

- **Determine COVID-19 safety measures.** Employers will need to carefully decide if pandemic safety measures will be required at the event and, if so, which ones are required or optional.

In-person events will require employers to balance employee engagement with safety and health risks.

Virtual Party Considerations

This year, employers might decide to host a virtual party for several reasons, such as accommodating a distributed workforce or responding to local COVID-19 transmission rates. Luckily, many activities such as trivia contests, ugly sweater contests and scavenger hunts can be replicated in the virtual environment.

While general party considerations still apply, keep in mind the following best practices specific to virtual celebrations:

- **Respect time differences.** Depending on the size and location of the workforce, employers should select a time that's appropriate for most employees. Participation could increase if the time is convenient to a majority of employees.
- **Ensure access for all employees.** Employers should ensure the virtual celebration is inclusive and accessible for all employees. It may be helpful to assign an accessibility point person who can assist with troubleshooting or additional requests before, during and after the event.

Employers know their employees best and can tailor virtual celebrations to accommodate employees' personal needs and schedules best.

Alternative Party Considerations

While holiday celebrations can positively impact workplace culture, there is also a case for forgoing a celebration. In addition to safety concerns, these events may have a financial cost, and holiday parties can present risks for employers.

Generally, holiday parties carry a cost, and diverting funds to throwing a celebration may not be an option, especially

during the pandemic. Although employees may be disappointed not participating in a holiday party, many employees may appreciate a gift or form of recognition as a replacement for their prized holiday party. Alternative methods for recognizing employees can include:

- Holiday gifts
- Additional paid time off
- Recognition for individual contributions

It's important to note that employers who typically host an annual celebration—but choose not to do so this year—should consider explaining to employees why throwing a holiday party isn't feasible. While some employees will be disappointed in this decision, they'll still appreciate the sincerity and transparency.

For More Information

As the end of the year approaches, employers find themselves torn between canceling or hosting some type of holiday celebration. Employers should consider what kind of celebration makes sense for their organization, even if that means not having one this year.

Holiday parties can help boost employee engagement, but employers must pay special attention to employee health and safety as the pandemic evolves. As many organizations encounter financial restraints, holiday celebrations are not a requirement by any means. However, employers should consider showing their appreciation for employees in some other way to boost engagement and morale.

For additional employee engagement or workplace holiday party resources, contact Employco USA, Inc. today.