

# Employer's Guide to Planning a Holiday Party

Brent Tilson

There are several benefits to offering a holiday party. Offering a holiday party could help with employee retention or even help build camaraderie in the workplace. They also provide an opportunity to build workplace culture outside of normal office hours or just give a break from the standard workday. However, there can also be high costs and a level of risk associated with these events, including inappropriate behaviors and lack of inclusivity. Therefore, thorough consideration of many aspects is critical.

How your organization chooses to run a holiday party is unique to what fits your workplace best. For example, your workplace could host a virtual event, include families, have an ugly sweater contest, or sponsor a charitable gift. The way a workplace holiday party is hosted is customizable to the event.

This Employer's Guide to Planning a Holiday Party is a resource that can help employers like you plan your organization's next or first-ever holiday party. This guide is not exhaustive but does cover key steps employers can consider when planning such an event.

## Determine the Purpose

Before planning a holiday party, the party's purpose needs to be determined. The purpose of the event will influence the details of the event. For example, if the purpose is to work on team culture or comradery during the event, it's usually best to plan some sort of game or activity that's interactive, or promotes socializing.

Well-executed holiday parties come with several purposes, such as building co-worker camaraderie, bringing joy to the workplace and allowing a time for positive reflection on the year's accomplishments. For many workplaces, holiday parties allow co-workers to intermingle and get to know one another outside the high-pressure work environment. Parties tend to be stress-free environments that are easy spots to create relationships. Whatever your purpose, make it known so the scope of the party can be based on what you want to get out of it.

## Holiday Party Planning Checklist

Planning a holiday party can be tricky because of all the aspects that need to be considered. Before getting too far into the process, be sure to have a plan. This holiday party planning checklist can be used to help ensure key aspects of the party are covered:

- **Choose an event coordinator.** This could be a professional event coordinator, HR professional, owner or employee volunteer. Regardless of who it is, designating one

person to be accountable for planning the event can help ensure that details don't become overlooked.

- **Select a date.** Determining the date and time of the party is crucial. People often travel during the holidays, so the earlier you set the date, the more likely you are to have high attendance rates.
- **Determine the type of holiday party.** There are various types of holiday parties, including at-work, after-hours, or virtual parties. Make sure to pick the best option for your organization. The section following this list explains these in detail.
- **Create a budget.** There's a lot to consider when budgeting for your office holiday party. When budgeting, it's essential to consider the venue, transportation, food, drinks, entertainment, and gifts.
- **Build the invitation list.** Determine who's invited, whether it's all or some employees, also taking into account guests, clients, and vendors. Having a list is the first step, and then invitations can be created. Invitations can be mailed, emailed, or distributed in person. Decide how invitations should be distributed well in advance.
- **Pick a venue.** Your venue can depend on budget, attendance, entertainment, location, and availability. Most importantly, choose a venue that's easy to travel to and navigate.
- **Plan transportation.** It's essential to have a plan for transportation, especially if alcohol will be served at the event. If the event is nearby, this could mean finding a transportation vendor or using local taxis or ride-sharing services, such as Uber or Lyft.
- **Determine catering.** Whether you want to cater your party or go out for food at a venue, you need to plan ahead. Be sure to ask for dietary restrictions and be inclusive of all dietary needs.
- **Set policies.** Policies covering topics such as employee schedules, attendance and appropriate behaviors should be determined before the event to help prevent potential incidents.
- **Provide entertainment and activities.** Fun activities can help keep attendees entertained and engaged. This could include renting games or setting up karaoke, for example.
- **Gather employees to celebrate.** Work holiday parties show appreciation and recognize employees for their hard work. Once the event is planned and the day arrives, it's time to execute the event.
- **Solicit feedback from employees.** After the event, employers can consider surveying employees or informally gathering feedback. Not only can this help provide insight on

future holiday parties, but it may also be useful in gathering intel on how to best engage employees through future events.

How an organization chooses to throw a holiday party is customizable to the organization at hand. It can be of benefit to evaluate what suits your organization best.

## Determining the Type of Holiday Party

There are a variety of ways to host a holiday party. Picking the best route for your organization can help ensure the event is a success. Factors that may determine the type of party an organization should have include budget, demographic of employees and the number of years the organization has been hosting holiday parties. What's right for one situation may not be right for another.

The following are common holiday work party types:

### **At-work Party**

At an at-work party, employees wrap up work early or break for an extended period of time to celebrate in the office. Oftentimes, this includes gathering and providing food and entertainment, such as gift exchanges or music. For this type of event, you'll need to supply your own food, and planning will be needed to align entertainment for the event. At-work parties are typically the highest attended and have the lowest cost. For some employers, this might be the most feasible or realistic option. However, employees may not be as excited or see as much value in them due to being on-site.

### **After-hours Party**

An after-hours party entails gathering at a venue nearby, such as a restaurant or bar, for dinner or a happy hour get-together. Bars and restaurants often have larger event rooms that are available to rent out to accommodate a party-size booking. Events at nearby locations can be helpful because there is minimal planning needed in addition to booking the reservation and promoting the event among employees. Usually, there is food and drinks on-site, and it's easy to have external entertainment. On the other hand, there is the risk of having lower attendance due to transportation or scheduling conflicts, and it can be fairly expensive as the bill is usually covered by the organization.

### **Off-site Group Activity**

A group activity is a fun way to both have a holiday party and bond with co-workers. Activities may include escape rooms, ice skating, golfing, theme park trips or contests. There are few limitations that exist with the type of activity that a group could engage in. It's most

important to make sure you pick an activity that's inclusive to everyone and potentially has another option available. For example, let's say you plan an ice-skating event, but most of your group doesn't ice skate. Having an indoor event with food and socializing may be a good secondary option that includes the entire group.

## **Formal Party or Gala**

A gala is a formal occasion, often with entertainment, that typically marks a special event. There is often a dress code. Hosting a formal event means there needs to be more in-depth planning. Typically, this type of party is held on a weekend or weeknight, likely at an event venue. It would be the best for employee recognition, high attendance, and level of value. A formal gathering can be more expensive and require extensive planning, so be sure to keep those aspects in mind.

## **Virtual Party**

One of your options for hosting a holiday party is to host a virtual holiday party. This can be beneficial if you're an organization that primarily has remote employees. Planning a virtual party has a similar process to hosting an in-person party. Virtual parties can also be an option for employers with a hybrid workforce. A virtual setting can be in place as the main event or in addition to an in-person celebration, as many remote employees may not be able to make it to the location but could appreciate the opportunity to participate in an event. The main difference is finding a way to have virtual celebrations. Such events can include:

- Virtual mixers designed for multiple conversations at once
- Ugly sweater contests
- Holiday karaoke
- Gingerbread house decorating and building
- Wine and cheese party
- Online escape room
- Trivia contest
- Virtual gift exchange

It's important to plan ahead so that necessary technology can be tested.

## **Holiday Party Considerations**

Workplace holiday parties can present challenges and liabilities for employers. It's important that employers proceed with caution, even if the event is virtual. Consider the following practices:

- **Evaluate your policies.** Employees should have easy access to the employee handbook and policies. These items should make them aware that a holiday party is considered a workplace event, meaning that all behaviors are to be followed with organizational policies in mind. Employers should consider any possible concerns with relevant workplace policies.
- **Keep holiday celebrations optional.** Employees may need to be compensated for their time based on their compensation level. It's generally best practice that holiday parties aren't a required event to attend. Additionally, not every employee may feel the same about a holiday celebration, so keep this in mind when requiring attendance. Forcing holiday party attendance can have the opposite effect of what you're trying to create by having the event.
- **Keep the celebration general.** Employees may feel differently on the appropriateness of observing one holiday over another. As such, it's best to keep the party general; for example, label the event as a "holiday party" versus a celebration for a specific holiday. This allows people of varying backgrounds and beliefs to feel included. Without generalization, employers risk the potential for a lack of inclusion and belonging.
- **Set expectations for behaviors.** Many holiday parties, including remote events, can host a risk of inappropriate behaviors, especially if alcohol is involved. As an employer, it's beneficial to reiterate the appropriate and expected behaviors, as well as relevant workplace policies, for the event. Be sure to remind employees that all expectations for the workplace are still enforced at the event.

## Conclusion...

As the end of the year approaches, it's time to consider hosting a holiday party for your workplace. It's important to consider what type of event you plan to host, as well as what goes into hosting that type of event.

Holiday parties can help boost employee engagement and help recognize employees' special accomplishments that may otherwise go unseen. Holiday parties can carry liability, so it's crucial these events are properly planned to avoid as much risk as possible. While holiday parties are not by any means required, they can help boost morale and end the year on a positive note.