

12 Bells of Wisdom for Employers at Christmas

Each year without exception we are asked to advise employers about an issue that occurred at a work or client Christmas Party. It never ceases to amaze me that employers who do not remind their employees of unacceptable behaviour before the Christmas party, are then surprised when an alcohol infused night out results in such behaviour arising. Employers have lost excellent employees due to such events. Change the cycle this year and read our following tips in dealing with your employees over this festive period.

1. **Prevention is Better than Cure!** Always remember health and safety of staff and clients around this festive season. This should include arranging safe travelling options to and from the event and possibly the next morning also. It should also ensure safety notices and procedures at the venue and precautions to avoid the event getting out of hand e.g. time restrictions, alcohol serving time limits and the quantity of free alcohol.
2. **Remind Staff of What is Naughty and not Nice?** Before the Christmas Party, it is advisable to send a reminder to all staff that any inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated and will be subject to the disciplinary policy. Remind them to respect their colleagues and not to let alcohol blur their perception or result in inappropriate behaviour or conduct including sexual harassment. You should keep evidence of this reminder to assist in defending a possible claim of vicarious liability in respect of conduct of the employees.
3. **Social Media Control.** Circulate rules about posts and pictures on social media in respect of work events, reminding staff of posting anything that may put the company's reputation into disrepute and to respect individual's privacy rights.
4. **Respect Different Cultures for Christmas.** In the multi-cultural society that we now live in, due consideration and acknowledgment should be given to the different beliefs and religions that may be present in your workplace.
5. **Rules to Avoid Inappropriate Gifts at Work.** A reminder to staff to take care with "Kris Kindle" presents, and make sure they are aware that a "funny present" is not the best idea to a work colleague and that such gifts may cause offence and might constitute harassment on grounds such as gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation.
6. **Out of Sight, Out of Mind.** Don't forget about employees who are absent on sick leave, carer's leave or protected leave.

7. **Charity Without Pressure.** Be mindful not to put financial pressure on employees when encouraging charity donations.
8. **Be Aware that Christmas is Not Merry for Everyone.** It is important to ensure that all employees are made aware of the Employee Assistance Program or other support services should they need to speak to anyone.
9. **Sick v. Hangover.** There may be a few sore heads during the festive season. Ensure that you follow your sick leave policy and request sick certs for absences during festive period. Consider asking employees to use annual leave days if illness is self-inflicted. Remind staff not to drive to work if out the night before. Do not allow staff to attempt to work if in safety critical roles.
10. **The After Party Issues.** Do not delay addressing issues or allegations about what may have occurred at the Christmas party. You have a duty of care to all employees to ensure that these issues are addressed as soon as possible so that no-one is anxious about coming into work or considers such behaviour as acceptable.
11. **Bonus.** If you are thinking of rewarding staff with a bonus this Christmas, it may be more beneficial to give staff gift vouchers or 'non-cash benefit' which can be given to staff to a €500 maximum once off payment without attracting PAYE, USC or PRSI.
12. **January Blues.** It is worth giving your staff something to look forward to in the New Year to address the blues when returning to work. This may also reduce the number of absenteeism in the early weeks of January and create a more productive atmosphere.

Anne O'Connell Solicitors

Fitzwilliam Hall, Fitzwilliam Place, Dublin 2.

www.aocsolicitors.ie