



GUIDE TO RUNNING CORPORATE SOCIAL EVENTS

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Introduction

Company social events can be an effective means of acknowledging employees' contribution and developing a positive culture within organisations. However they also have the potential to provide a context for inappropriate behaviour that could have serious repercussions. Employers must be aware that the party venue is basically an extension of the office and that they remain responsible for the well being, protection and behaviour of employees during such events.

Location

Employers need to choose a location that is suitable for the party. The office may not always be the most appropriate venue. However, if it is chosen the employer must carry out a hazard and risk assessment of the area to take account of access, egress and use of the office while under the influence of alcohol. Furthermore, employers are under a duty to make reasonable adjustments to the venue to accommodate any employees with disabilities. If an offsite venue is used, the employer's responsibility towards their employees is not exempted.

Alcohol

Most problems arising out of company functions relate to alcohol consumption. To reduce the likelihood of such problems, the employer should be aware of the following:

- If the company supplies the alcohol or encourages its consumption it could be partially liable for the employees' actions.
- The employer's liability can extend beyond the end of the party particularly where employees are back in work the following day have not fully recovered from the effects of the party (for example in respect of employees who operate machinery).
- Employers should endeavour to limit the amount of alcohol provided.
- To this end, it is advisable not to offer an unrestricted free bar but rather to issue a limited number of bar tokens per person. Double measures of spirits should not be redeemable.
- Employers should actively discourage employees from driving when under the influence of alcohol. This may involve arranging transport or organising special rates with taxi firms.

Drugs

Drug use at parties is a problem that employers need to anticipate. If an employee is discovered to be under the influence of an illegal drug at a work party, the employer should treat this in the same manner had the discovery taken place during work hours. The employer should address this as a disciplinary issue and take appropriate disciplinary action. Employers should bear in mind that possession of illegal drugs is a criminal offence.

Discrimination

- Employees have the right to enjoy the party free from harassment and discrimination, particularly on grounds of gender, civil status, age, sexual orientation, family status, race/nationality, religion, disability or membership of the travelling community. The employer has a duty to protect that right.
- Many companies have a religiously diverse workforce. As such, there may be employees who do not celebrate festivals such as Christmas. Employers should consider that these employees may not wish to attend such a celebration or may not drink alcohol. Also, care must be taken so as not to marginalise these employees who may feel they have been excluded from bonding opportunities or promotions by not attending such parties.

- Employers need to choose entertainment that is culturally suitable for their employees. Employers should ensure that the entertainment is not offensive or discriminatory to any employees eg, a comedian who tells racist or chauvinistic jokes should not be engaged.

Harassment & Sexual Harassment

- Sexual harassment at a work party constitutes sexual harassment at work.
- It is the employer's responsibility to ensure a harassment-free environment at company social events as far as is reasonably practicable.
- Two main problems may be caused by an employee's unwelcome behaviour towards another. Firstly, the employer will have to deal with the harasser accordingly, which may involve the imposition of disciplinary sanctions, up to and including dismissal for gross misconduct. Secondly, the victim could bring a discrimination/harassment claim against the employer.
- Employers are liable for any harassment that occurs at work parties unless all reasonable steps are taken to prevent it from occurring.
- The employer needs to implement and enforce an anti-harassment policy, which includes references to conduct at work-related events. This policy needs to be reviewed on a regular basis.
- People often attempt to excuse sexual harassment at work parties, as they believe it to be drunken talk and a laugh and outside of work hours.
- Many incidents at these functions are never reported until at a later date when an incident occurs again. Ignorance is not an excuse for an employer. Employers must be proactive in putting measures in place.

Absenteeism or poor performance

Alcohol related absence or poor performance at work the day after the work party can be prevalent. It is advisable to have the party on an evening before a day-off (eg, Friday), to avoid this problem occurring, thus minimising the risk of next day accidents.

Health & safety and injuries

Occupational health and safety is another important factor to be considered in the context of company social events. Employers should do their own due diligence on the venue chosen for the party. The venue should be suitable for the number of people and the context of the party (food, alcohol, music, etc). Employers should ensure that there is safe access and egress and emergency arrangements in place at the venue and satisfy themselves that it is a safe venue.

Misconduct

A major risk associated with work parties is the potential for misconduct between members of staff due to over consumption of alcohol. Moreover, acts of gross misconduct including physical violence, theft, abuse of company property or drug taking are more frequently associated with drunken behaviour than in a normal work setting. The employer must remind employees in advance that the same disciplinary procedures apply during the party and acts of gross misconduct may be punishable by dismissal if substantiated. In some instances employers have a separate grievance/disciplinary policy for work parties or may amend or include a subsection in their existing policy.

So what can employers do?

In accordance with all the points mentioned above, an appropriate corporate events policy is needed to cover the majority of risks associated with work functions. If necessary, disciplinary, grievance, anti-bullying, harassment and sexual harassment policies should be amended and communicated to staff prior to the event.

Finally, it should be noted in the invitation to the work function that appropriate behaviour is required at the party. When employees accept an invitation to a corporate social event, their behaviour reflects the company's image.