

More holiday office parties, despite economic worries

Nearly 76% of companies plan to hold a holiday office party this year, the highest percentage since 2016, when 80% planned festivities, according to a survey conducted by outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

According to the annual survey on holiday party plans, conducted in November among 250 HR representatives across the country, of those planning parties, nearly 7% are having a party after one year or more of not having one.

The 76% of companies planning to hold parties is up over 10% from the 65.4% who planned parties last year.

Growing concerns about an economic downturn appear not to have dampened holiday cheer this year. When asked if they felt the economy had improved in 2019, only 39% said it had, compared to 63% in 2018. Twenty-five percent said the economy did not improve this year, compared to just 9% last year. Companies plan to celebrate anyway. "Generally, profits are up, and corporate tax cuts have been a boon for companies," said Andrew Challenger, vice president of Challenger, Gray & Christmas. "While there may be a coming slowdown that could impact next year's festivities, this year employees will party."

More companies plan to extend invitations to employees' partners and families to their holiday festivities this year. Nearly 47% of companies will invite families and spouses this year, compared to 30% in 2018.

Most companies plan to hold parties on a workday or near the end of a workday: 60% in 2019 compared to 52% in 2018. Meanwhile, 53% of companies are offering alcohol this year versus 49% last year.

Positive and lasting effects of the holiday work party

Perhaps executives and decision-makers are deciding to keep holiday office parties because they've noticed the benefits.

"The positive impact of a good holiday party keeps on working long after the last dance. Having happy employees makes for a better work environment, which ultimately affects the productivity of your entire organization. So the next time you are looking for places to scale back, before you take away the company holiday party, consider its lasting impact" says experienced healthcare executive, Kim Bassett.

Kim lists these four benefits of an annual holiday celebration:

1. **Improves work-life balance**, which is growing more and more important in the workplace as Millennials age into the workplace. Studies show they consistently choose work-life balance over pay and career progression.
2. **Establishes tradition within workplace culture**, which provides a feeling of comfort, loyalty, and security among employees. It helps create a positive family environment.
3. **It's humanizing**. Seeing your coworkers in a casual, non-work environment—and meeting people important to them—has a humanizing effect. Ties beyond work are created with a deeper understanding,

empathy, and respect for each other. This is beneficial to creating a better work environment where your team starts behaving more like a team.

4. **Expresses appreciation.** Throwing a holiday party is one of the most effective ways to thank your employees. The holidays generally bring out people's softer, more appreciative side, and a holiday party can go a long way to improve even the grouchiest of employees' view of the company and your leadership.

Beware holiday harassment at offsite locations

'Tis the season for holiday parties, which means 'tis the season to prepare for potential harassment lawsuits. The danger is especially great if festivities take place away from company premises at a hotel.

Remember, just because the party isn't at work or during work hours, doesn't mean you're not liable for harassment.

Recent case: A teenage sale clerk alleged that a few months after she started working for Elite Wireless, a new store manager began to make sexual advances. She said he asked her to hang out with him and "hook up." A few weeks later, she complained to the company's district manager about her boss's pressure.

Then the company held a holiday party at a hotel. The store manager invited staff members to his room. When her co-workers began leaving, the clerk texted her boyfriend for a ride home. Everyone else had left before the boyfriend arrived, and the young woman alleged the manager sexually assaulted her. She escaped and ran to the parking lot.

The next morning, she reported the assault to the police, who found bruises on her body. She then called the CEO of Elite Wireless to report the assault and that she had pressed charges.

Elite did nothing to separate the alleged assailant and victim. A company rep told the teen that it could not transfer managers. Later, the teenager was transferred. The CEO told her it could do nothing more because the alleged assault happened away from the workplace. Eventually, she was fired for missing too much work.

That prompted her to complain to the EEOC, which is now suing the company. (*EEOC v. Elite Wireless*, ED CA, 2019)