

# Celebrate safely in-person or with a virtual holiday party



The holiday party is a staple end-of-year tradition for many businesses and employees. They provide an opportunity for employers to show appreciation to their employees for a year of hard work. These parties also play an important role in team bonding among the staff. Many employers invest a significant amount of time, money, and resources into planning memorable holiday events for their teams. This year employers are especially concerned with making employees feel appreciated and engaged, as concern continues to rise over the trend of the great resignation.

Last year, end-of-year festivities looked a little bit different for most people. Both personal and workplace holiday gatherings were impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Many people had to celebrate with coworkers and family members over Zoom calls rather than in person.

While covid-19 infection rates are on the decline and offices are beginning to reopen, you'll still need to proceed with caution when planning your company holiday event this year. You definitely shouldn't skip the celebrations, but you probably will need to adjust your plans to move things virtual or scale down your in-person gatherings in line with CDC guidelines.

Here are some ideas on how to get people together this holiday season without putting them at risk of infection.

## Safe in-person festivities

While the safest option is a virtual event, many business owners have been itching to get their teams together in-person this holiday season. If your office has already reopened you may be inclined to skip the video call and get your team together in a more traditional manner.

The CDC has set some [guidelines for in-person holiday gatherings](#) this year. If you decide to follow this route, ensure that you're following these guidelines:

- Both vaccinated and unvaccinated people should wear masks while gathering in communities with substantial to high transmission rates.
- Unvaccinated people, as well as those with unvaccinated or immunocompromised people in their households, should wear well-fitting face masks over their nose and mouth while attending gatherings.
- Avoid crowded poorly ventilated spaces and preferably gather outdoors.
- Do not attend or host a gathering if you are sick and get tested if you have symptoms of covid-19 or have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive.

If you want to host a physical office party this year, consider these options to host a safer in-person get-together.

### **Limit attendance**

This is probably not the year to go all out by renting a venue and hosting a large holiday party. Save the big event for next year and host more intimate gatherings this year.

If you have multiple business locations, host smaller individual gatherings for each one. While it's nice for people from different worksites to be able to mingle, it does increase the exposure risk and make contact tracing a bit more difficult. Team bonding with those from their own locations will also likely have the greatest impact on employee engagement and work performance unless your different worksites collaborate frequently.

If you work in a very large office, consider giving department heads a budget to do something special for their team instead of getting the whole building together for a holiday party. Plus the culture of different teams within the same organization will vary. The department heads will likely also have more insight into what their team would appreciate most this year such as a holiday happy hour at a nearby bar, a nice team lunch, or gift cards to buy something nice for their families. Keep the focus on team bonding and employee appreciation rather than a flashy event for this year — it may even have a bigger impact.

### **Consider outdoor celebrations**

The CDC has encouraged outdoor gatherings this year. This can be tricky if you live in an area that gets extremely cold in the winter, but for employers in areas with more mild winters, it is a great option. Plenty of companies host employee events and barbeques outside, so why not host your holiday party there.

Outdoor events are fun if you like to incorporate games into your parties, as you'll have more room to set up fun games and party activities. Set up a craft table, plan a scavenger hunt, play games like bingo or charades, get a karaoke machine, or get people moving to fend off the cold. There's plenty of fun to be had outside, and the transmission risk is lower.

### **Say goodbye to buffet-style serving**

People probably won't feel comfortable with communal serving options like buffets, snack bowls, self-serve pitchers, or pre-poured beverages. Opt for individually wrapped snack options rather than bowls or chips, pretzels, or other snacks. Deserts should either be individually plated and served by caterers or self-served in

individual packaging. People will not want to cut themselves a slice of cake or grab a cookie from a box that everyone else has also had their hand in. Invest in bartenders and catering staff to individually serve people.



### **Keep it short and sweet**

Plan a fun party, but not necessarily one that will go late into the night. The goal should be to give people a safe opportunity to socialize and enjoy a meal or some entertainment together. Ideally, consider entertainment that can largely be enjoyed while seated as keeping people mostly in their small table groups will make exposure tracking easier in case someone does test positive after the event.

Save the big dancing and drinks party for next year. Maintaining proper safety measures gets increasingly more difficult as people become intoxicated, so it's a good idea to keep the party short and sweet rather than letting people drink and linger for too long after the final course of the meal has wrapped up.

### **Celebrate during the workday**

Consider skipping the fancy holiday party and carving out time during the workday for holiday festivities. If the holidays aren't a busy time for your business, set aside time for various holiday activities in the workday to spread holiday cheer without increasing anyone's exposure risk.

If you're working in-person in an office, set aside an hour or two for employees to decorate their cubicles/desks, put up a Christmas tree (or other holiday decor), and decorate the office together. This is a fun bonding activity, and a great way to put everyone in the holiday spirit.

Doing things during the workday helps build morale, but it also keeps people safer than a full holiday party. Workday festivities are typically limited to the staff that is already in the office every day with each other. Alternatively, if you host a traditional holiday party, there will typically be plus-ones, catering or serving staff, bartenders, and possibly other diners (if not held at a private venue). Having extra people does create a higher exposure risk.

### **Virtual holiday party ideas**

The safest option this year will once again be to host your company's holiday event virtually. Virtual holiday parties may become a new holiday tradition, as many employers are letting staff members opt to stay remote on a permanent basis. Team building and creating a sense of community for remote employees is especially

important, so consider incorporating one or more of these fun virtual holiday activities.



### **Virtual happy hour**

The Zoom happy hour has become a tried and true approach to after-work socializing over the past two years. Skip the in-person activities altogether and gather the team for a happy hour over Zoom or another video conferencing platform.

You can take a BYOB approach and have everyone join from home with their drink of choice. You could also host a virtual cocktail party with a mixologist to teach everyone how to make fun holiday drinks at home. This one requires a bit of preparation as guests will need to know what supplies to have at home. You could send gift boxes with a shaker and the special ingredients as a special gift for those that RSVP to the event, but shipping alcohol itself is more complicated as carrier and state regulations vary.

Be sure to make a holiday playlist on Spotify to play throughout the happy hour and share with the team. After all, every holiday party needs some classic holiday songs to set the festive mood! You can play some games or incorporate some other ideas on this list to make your happy hour memorable and fun!

Virtual happy hours are cost-effective, require minimal planning, and are a great way to gather remote or hybrid teams! As an added bonus, you don't have to worry about anyone driving home while intoxicated as everyone is already safely at home.

### **Hot chocolate or apple cider mixer**

Try a festive team happy hour with warm non-alcoholic holiday beverage options. This is great for companies whose culture is more formal and generally doesn't include alcohol at team events. While tech companies have popularized more casual cultures with end-of-day beers, mixology classes, and parties with plenty of liquor, that doesn't mean that your business can't take a different approach.

Hot chocolate and apple cider are classic beloved holiday drinks that can be enjoyed at any time of day. You may find that a midday mixer is better for your staff than an after-work happy hour. For example, if a large portion of your staff members are working parents, the turnout for a 5pm happy hour may be low. People may need to pick up children from daycare or afterschool activities, head to second jobs, or meet other obligations. Setting aside some time for a Zoom mixer during standard business hours means that everyone is able to attend.

## **Dress up for the holidays**

In the week leading up to Christmas or other holiday breaks have employees dress up for work in the holiday spirit. Have an ugly sweater day, plan out a whole holiday spirit week, or host a festive photo contest. Encourage employees to wear outfits that reflect whatever holidays they celebrate.

Be sure to get everyone on camera via video call or have them send in pictures so that employees can show off their favorite holiday attire. You can even have a best-dressed contest that employees can vote on.

For photo contests, you can get creative with the categories. People love to show off photos of their pets looking cute, so definitely include a pet photo contest. Family photos are a fun option to let people get their kids involved. You can have categories to highlight funny photos, creative decorating, and more! Let people show off their personalities and their holiday spirit!

## **Virtual secret Santa**

If Secret Santa (or another gift-giving game/activity) is a holiday tradition in your office, consider doing a virtual version this year.

Those that opt into the workplace Secret Santa game should randomly draw or be randomly assigned a coworker to pick out and purchase a gift for. They cannot let the person know that they drew their name until gift exchange time, so participants need to rely on their knowledge of this coworker and use some creativity to find the perfect gift. It's also common to set a spending limit to make it fair for everyone and keep the financial commitment required to participate relatively low. When assigning giftees you will need to provide the gifters with the mailing address or a shipping label for their assigned giftee so that the item may be mailed for a fully socially distanced exchange.

If your workforce is fully back in the office, you could also do a more traditional version of Secret Santa where the gifts are exchanged in-person or left on each other's desks. However, it's important not to exclude any remote staff from the fun, so you may need to do both an in-person and remote version so that no one is left out if you've allowed some staff to remain remote or hybrid.

There are also now some online platforms set up to help groups do virtual white elephant gift exchanges if that is part of your office's traditions. White elephant is a popular holiday game where everyone brings a wrapped gift and they go around in a circle picking gifts and unwrapping them. Each person can select a wrapped gift from the pile to open or choose to steal a gift from someone that has selected and unwrapped their gift already. Everyone ends up with one item that they get to take home at the end.

## **Holiday card exchange**

Holiday card exchanges are a popular socially distanced option to spread some holiday cheer. Those that sign up for the card exchange will send holiday cards to others. If it's a small group, everyone can send a card to each other. For large groups, you can match people up so that everyone gets a handful of cards without placing too large of a burden on participants.

These exchanges are a great way for employees to show off their creativity, crafting skills, or humor through their card choices and share thoughtful messages with one another. The holidays can be a tough time for some people, particularly this year and last year as many people can't spend the holidays with their families due to travel and covid transmission concerns. Sending cards is a great way to spread joy and build a sense of community among your staff.

## Gift packages

Opting out of your normal in-person holiday bash doesn't mean that you need to ditch the gift bags. Many companies go all out for their holiday party gift bags, and employees generally enjoy the items. Instead of party bags, turn them into care packages and send them to employees' homes.

You can send your normal company-branded swag, gift cards, tasty holiday goodies, or some curated items for remote staff. Think about things your remote staff might like to use on their work-from-home days like nice coffee or teas to brew at home, wellness items for a little mid-day self-care, cozy blankets or branded hoodies, Doordash or UberEats gift cards to treat themselves at lunchtime, or a Snuggie or Comfy for cold days.

Who doesn't love receiving a package?! Show your employees you appreciate their hard work with a thoughtful gift package.



**Cookie decorating and DIY**

## activities

Get the team together to bake or decorate Christmas cookies, gingerbread houses, or do a festive holiday craft.

With a bit of planning all of these activities can be remote-friendly. You can have employees RSVP to the session and send them all gingerbread house kits or craft kits. Stocking or ornament decorating are common holiday crafts that don't require too many supplies. A holiday paint by numbers can also be a fun option. You can even turn it into a paint-and-sip happy hour if you'd like.

Get everyone together over Zoom to talk and work on their cookies, houses, or crafts together. Leave some time at the end for everyone to show off their finished products. You can even turn it into a friendly competition by voting on who created the best one or most creative design.

## Virtual team building

Team building activities should be incorporated all throughout the year, but you can definitely put a festive spin on them and turn them into fun virtual holiday party games!

Consider some classic icebreaker games to help your staff get to know each other better, especially if many new team members have joined remotely during the pandemic.

## Try out these virtual team building activities:

- **Never have I ever holiday edition.** Each player shares something that they've never done, and anyone who has done it puts a finger down. The first one to put all of their fingers down loses. Keep this one work appropriate and ideally, holiday-themed
- **2 truths and a lie.** Each person shares two true facts about themselves and one false fact. Everyone else has to guess which of the three is not true.
- **Guess who:** Collect holiday photos of everyone from childhood or funny holiday stories and have everyone guess which of their coworkers contributed each photo or story
- **Virtual office talent show.** Let everyone show off their secret talents or just something fun and silly.

## Other non-icebreaker games that can be fun for team building include:

- **Name that tune.** Play some holiday songs and see who can name that tune first.
- **Holiday bingo.** Send out some virtual holiday-themed bingo cards and let the fun begin.
- **Holiday trivia.** Ask trivia questions related to the holidays such as holiday pop-culture trivia, history questions, or other trivia around favorite holidays like Christmas, Hanukkah, New Years, and Kwanzaa.
- **Virtual holiday scavenger hunt.** There are a couple of ways to conduct a virtual scavenger hunt. The first is to give clues to direct attendees to find something online. You can have these lead to something on your website or internal system or take more of a trivia approach with someone looking for a photo or piece of information online. The other option is to name common household items and have people race to find them in their homes and bring them back to show on camera.

## Holiday movie watch party

Get everyone together to watch a classic holiday movie from the comfort of their own home. Pick a classic movie or let employees vote on what they'd like to see. There are a number of services such as Watch Party, Teleparty (formerly Netflix Party), Hulu Watch Party, Amazon Prime Watch Party that allow for group viewing and chats. This is a nice laid-back option for teams that just want to sit back and relax.

## Safety first

There are a number of covid-safe options for your company holiday party this year. Be aware that the CDC guidelines could change as could local guidelines and mandates. If you plan to incorporate an in-person component into your workplace celebrations this year, it is important to stay up to date on these guidelines and local covid infection rates to ensure that you are keeping your staff safe.

Holiday parties can play a role in improving employee satisfaction and retention, which is paramount in the

current labor climate, so you should do something for your employees this holiday. However, safety should come first. Your employees would rather have a virtual celebration, bonus, or care package over getting sick at an event. Use your best judgment and keep yourself updated on the changing conditions in your area.