

Party Time - Is the Holiday Office Party Really Dead?

2. December 2010 By Steve Palazzolo

...or is it just so darn boring it seems that way?

I keep reading articles that say the time-worn tradition of the office holiday party, is dead. Dead, you say? Yes, dead. One article I read (really a very good one in Business Week—you can see it

at http://www.businessweek.com/lifestyle/content/nov2010/bw20101117_106457.htm) is even entitled “The End of the Office Holiday Party.” As proof positive that the traditional office party is dead, the author, Joel Stein, reports that the Queen of England has decided to cancel “Buckingham Palace’s biannual Christmas party.” Mr. Stein then cites a bunch of statistics from a bunch of studies showing how companies from BNA to, well, the Queen of England, are either not having a party at all or are cutting way back on how much they spend.

Here is what is weird though. Mr. Stein then goes on to describe many companies that are having what you can conservatively describe as all-out bashes. One Internet company, he reports, is renting a football stadium, hiring bands and flying in celebrity endorsers of its service. Another company (a personal injury law firm, according to the article) is reported to have hired Sting to play its company holiday party. I have said it before and I’ll say it again, I might be on the wrong side of the v.

So is the office party dead or not? I don’t know. I DO know our office is having one, and Sting will not be performing, but it would be nice. Here is what I do know: I’m an employment lawyer, and while my job may not be to kill the office holiday party, it is my job to make it so darn boring that it seems like it is dead (just in case you didn’t get it, that was a joke). With that in mind, here are some things to consider when setting up your holiday party. And instead of giving you my own thoughts on the matter I am going to borrow some thoughts from our esteemed associate Greg Kilby. Greg wrote an article on this topic last year. If you want to read the full article you can find it at http://www.wnj.com/office_holiday_parties-a_legal_minefield-12-4-2009_labor_law/. In short, here is what Greg suggested:

- **Hire professional bartenders:** Even if you have an open bar, it is better to have someone such as a bartender dispensing the alcoholic drinks. Instruct bartenders on when to limit alcoholic service. That way, gatekeepers limit the access to the alcohol and can prevent inebriated people from further imbibing.
- **Serve food:** Make sure there are plenty of things to eat so that people are not drinking on empty stomachs; avoid having too many salty foods since these encourage people to drink more.
- **Have plenty of soft drinks:** Provide sodas, sparkling juices, bottled water and lots of other appealing “soft” drink options.
- **Hand out drink tickets:** Give all attendees a limited number of tickets for the open bar; once the tickets are gone, they can purchase their own drinks (reducing your liability) or drink the plentiful soft options.

- **Skip the alcohol altogether:** Have an earlier holiday gathering, such as a lunch banquet, and do not serve alcohol.
- **Offer shuttles or taxis:** Distribute **free taxi passes**, making it easy for employees to get to and from the party without driving. This way, employee can ride home that evening and back to work the next day in a cab.
- **Remind everyone of the policies:** Before the party, circulate a memo reminding people of your sexual harassment policies; let them know that the policies apply to events outside of the 9-5 environment. Remind supervisors of the rules and what to do if they witness or hear of potential harassment.
- **Have a dress code:** Suggest a dress code for the party that keeps things professional. Avoiding provocative dress can alleviate some forms of harassment.
- **Host a family event:** Instead of limiting attendees to employees, invite their spouses or families. Consider inviting clients or business partners. The presence of other people may help keep the event appropriate.
- **Avoid certain traditions:** While mistletoe may be your favorite decoration of the season, it really doesn't belong in the office. Avoid anything that could contribute to an environment of harassment.

Happy Holidays.