



Office Party Horror Stories: Avoiding Similar Issues This Holiday Season

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Catharine Morisset was quoted on *Business.com* on December 10, 2015. The article “Office Party Horror Stories: Avoiding Similar Issues This Holiday Season” offered up some advice about common office party mistakes and ways to avoid them.

Your event might be in the large conference room down the hall or it might be in the large ballroom downtown, but, either way, it is still considered work. “Employer organized or sponsored get-togethers are still activities that take place ‘at the workplace,’” Catharine said. “This is an especially important concept because it means that employers can be held liable for the entire host of workplace claims—from sexual harassment to assault to workplace injuries.”

Another consideration, especially for employers that like to make parties mandatory: If an employee is required to be there, then some employees might be entitled to overtime pay for their time on the dance floor. Catharine explained: “If office party events are mandatory, non-overtime exempt workers are entitled to their regular pay, and this time counts as hours worked for overtime calculation purposes.”

The old saying, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” certainly applies here. Before the day of the event, human resources should send employees a friendly reminder about workplace policies. Although you want your employees to enjoy themselves at the party, it’s worth including a comment in the invitation about celebrating, as Catharine said, “in a joyful, professional manner.”

In addition to a general staff reminder about professional decorum, supervisors should understand what is expected of them during the festivities. According to Catharine, “More important [than the invite notice] may be for HR or a respected upper-level manager to remind supervisors that they set the tone for the event and they also have a responsibility to watch out and correct inappropriate behavior.” A subtle and professional comment or correction in the moment by a supervisor might just nip a potential legal complaint in the bud.

The ubiquity of technology and social media exacerbates all of the risks of workplace claims—from harassment to injuries. “Modern technology also unfortunately opens the door for more types of inappropriate behavior—and a clear, easily shared record of them. Think Facebook photos or text messages rather than inappropriate photos on the copy machine,” cautioned Catharine.

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