Is your office Christmas party inclusive?

[et_pb_section fb_built="1" _builder_version="3.0.100" background_image="http://davidk423.sg-host.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/bdbf_final-stages-1-4-1.jpg" custom_padding="|||" global_module="2165" saved_tabs="all" global_colors_info="{}"][et_pb_row _builder_version="4.7.4" min_height="66.4px" custom_padding="50px||||false|false" global_colors_info="{}"][et_pb_column type="4_4" _builder_version="3.25" custom_padding="|||" global_colors_info="{}" custom_padding__hover="|||"][et_pb_text _builder_version="4.7.4" _dynamic_attributes="content" text_font="|700|||||||" text_font_size="27px" background_layout="dark" custom_margin="0px|||" custom_padding="0px|||" global_colors_info="{}"]@ET-DC@eyJkeW5hbWljIjp0cnVlLCJjb250ZW50IjoicG9zdF90aXRsZSIsInNldHRpbmdzIjp7ImJlZm9yZSI6IiIsImFmdGVyIjoiIn19@[/et_pb_text][et_pb_text _builder_version="4.7.4" _dynamic_attributes="content" _module_preset="default" background_layout="dark" global_colors_info="{}"]@ET-DC@eyJkeW5hbWljIjp0cnVlLCJjb250ZW50IjoicG9zdF9kYXRlIiwic2V0dGluZ3MiOnsiYmVmb3JlIjoiIiwiYWZ0ZXIiOiIiLCJkYXRlX2Zvcm1hdCI6ImRlZmF1bHQiLCJjdXN0b21fZGF0ZV9mb3JtYXQiOiIifX0=@[/et_pb_text][/et_pb_column][/et_pb_row][/et_pb_section][et_pb_section fb_built="1" admin_label="section" _builder_version="3.22.3" global_colors_info="{}"][et_pb_row admin_label="row" _builder_version="4.7.4" background_size="initial" background_position="top_left" background_repeat="repeat" global_colors_info="{}"][et_pb_column type="4_4" _builder_version="3.25" custom_padding="|||" global_colors_info="{}" custom_padding__hover="|||"][et_pb_text _builder_version="4.10.7" text_orientation="justified"

hover_enabled="0″ use_border_color="off" global_colors_info="{}" sticky_enabled="0″]

After a year off, office Christmas parties are back and – Omicron permitting – look set to be bigger than ever in 2021. While this is a great opportunity for the team to get together in person after being isolated for much of the past two years, employers need to ensure that the celebrations include the whole workforce.

The risks of getting it wrong range from a disgruntled less productive workforce and flight risks, to employment tribunal claims of discrimination and constructive dismissal to name a few.

Making the Christmas party a truly inclusive event takes more than ensuring that everyone is invited. While care should be taken to ensure that no one is missed from the guest list (consider, for example, staff who are on long-term sick leave or maternity / other forms of family leave), it is also important that staff know the event is voluntary. There may be many reasons people don't want to attend the party, and it should be made clear that they will not suffer a disadvantage if they choose not to attend.

Each workforce is individual. Accordingly, it is important for employers to speak to their staff about what they will enjoy. After all, this is supposed to be a celebration and a reward for hard work. For smaller organisations, this can be done in a team meeting, whereas larger organisations may need to form a committee made up of different sections of the workforce. As well as talking to staff beforehand, it is important to obtain feedback after the event that can be used to plan future events.

As a starting point, **Senior Associate Clare Brereton** sets out below some guidance on matters employers should consider each party season.

1. **Name of the party**

For some people, the very fact that their employer is having a “Christmas” party at all could make them feel excluded. The UK is made up of people of many different faiths, who practice their faith in different ways and others have no faith.

Given the time of year, it is likely to be difficult to avoid any mention of “Christmas”, but Christmas does not need to be the focus of the event. For example, replace “Christmas” with “festive” or “winter” party. The menu does not need to include a Christmas dinner. Traditions such as Christmas crackers and “Secret Santa” could be replaced with other games, such as word games or an awards ceremony celebrating special achievements over the past year. Christmas music does not need to be played (and, indeed, many party attendees may welcome the break).

2. **The day and date of the party**

Although it is likely to be almost impossible to select a day and time when everyone who wants to attend the party can do so, there are steps that an employer can take to ensure groups of people are not excluded. It is important to avoid having the party on a date that clashes with a religious holiday as employees of those faiths will have other commitments on those days.

When looking at a date more generally, there are some factors that need to be considered. For example, there may be one day of the week which is the non-working day for the majority of an employer’s workforce, and it would be sensible to try and avoid having the party on that day. If there are Jewish employees who observe Shabbat, then holding the party on a Friday evening would mean that they would not be able to attend. If the event is in the evening, some employees may struggle to find childcare.

If possible, employers should consult with the workforce in

good time to identify whether there are any dates and/or days of the week on which they would not be able to attend the party. Once a date is set, give staff as much notice as possible.

3. **Venue of the party**

The location of the party is also significant. Physical features of a venue can make it more difficult for people with certain disabilities to attend. The need for the party space to be wheel-chair accessible is likely to be high on the list of an employer's requirements, but employers should also consider what the noise levels and atmosphere of the venue will be like when it is full of people. If loud music will be playing it can be more difficult for wheel-chair users or those with certain conditions (including ADHD) to participate in conversations, particularly if the venue is crowded.

Employers also need to take care to consider employees with hidden disabilities. The past year has been very difficult for many people, and some employees may experience social anxiety at the prospect of a crowded party space, especially given the arrival of the Omicron variant. Therefore, consider the size and capacity of the venue and whether it is feasible to have the party in a larger venue which permits social distancing and has natural ventilation.

Employers might wish to take other steps to ensure the heath and safety of their employees is safeguarded during this time, for example asking employees to take a lateral flow test before attending the party and to wear face coverings in particularly crowded areas (e.g. lifts or queues for the cloakroom). And, of course, anyone experiencing COVID-19 symptoms should be told not to attend.

4. **Alcohol**

The stereotypical office Christmas party involves warm white wine, some crisps and people standing around chatting. While

the quality of the catering is often of a higher standard than this, difficulties can arise if the party is too focused on alcohol.

There are many reasons why people do not drink alcohol, including pregnancy and breastfeeding, religious, cultural and health reasons. While banning alcohol altogether is unlikely to be necessary, it is important to ensure that there are high quality non-alcoholic drinks available and that the format of the party is not such that the only "activity" is drinking. Employees should not feel pressured into drinking more than they want to and it is important that it is made clear that harassment of other colleagues will not be tolerated. You can read more about how employers can manage the risk of harassment **here**.

5. **Catering**

Food is a vital part of all parties, but hosting an inclusive event involves more than making sure there are vegetarian options available. Many venues are used to catering for a wide range of dietary requirements (e.g. vegan, kosher, halal, nut-free, gluten-free), so it should not be difficult for employers to ensure that all of their staff are catered for.

The easiest thing to do is to ask employees what their dietary requirements are before selecting a venue, so that you know in advance whether your chosen venue can meet those requirements.

And finally…

While it is important to remember the risks of getting it wrong, hosting a successful party at this time of year can be hugely beneficial to morale. A good employer will know its workforce and the type of event that staff will enjoy. Start by considering what would be a suitable celebration for your organisation and go from there. If in doubt ask the workforce for suggestions, there could be a great idea just waiting to be discovered!

If you would like to discuss any issues relating to the content of this article, please contact Clare Brereton (clarebrereton@bdbf.co.uk), or your usual BDBF contact.

[/et_pb_text][/et_pb_column][/et_pb_row][/et_pb_section][et_pb_section fb_built="1" _builder_version="3.26.6" global_colors_info="{}"][et_pb_row _builder_version="3.26.6" global_colors_info="{}"][et_pb_column type="4_4" _builder_version="3.26.6" global_colors_info="{}"][/et_pb_column][/et_pb_row][/et_pb_section]