

## The Office Christmas Party

Christmas party season is almost underway and now is the time for employers to take a moment to consider the potential employment law issues and review the relevant existing workplace policies. The Christmas party is effectively an extension of the workplace and employers are likely to have the same legal responsibility for what happens during the Christmas party as they do during working hours undertaken in the office.

### What are some of the main issues to consider?

#### *Discrimination*

There are a number of discrimination concerns for an employer to consider. For example, if an employer has any disabled employees, it will need to consider whether any reasonable adjustments or physical assistance is necessary so that such employees are able to join in the festivities. There may also be employees who do not celebrate Christmas for religious reasons and employers must be careful not to exclude such workers from the festive activities taking place. There may also be employees who do not drink alcohol for the same reasons and non-alcoholic alternatives should be provided.

Therefore, an employer will need to try and cater to the needs of everyone who will be attending the party to avoid discrimination. It may be worthwhile employers reviewing any equal opportunities policy they have for a reminder of their responsibilities.

#### *Harassment*

Broadly defined, harassment is any unwanted conduct that has the purpose or effect of violating dignity or creating a hostile or intimidating environment, where the conduct occurs on the grounds of sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion, age or belief. The Christmas party may be conducive to unwanted conduct occurring, because it blurs the lines between work and play (particularly if the party takes place away from an employer's premises). In addition, alcohol is invariably involved, which has the potential to diminish individuals' inhibitions and increase the risk of unwanted conduct occurring.

#### *Health and Safety*

Another important consideration is health and safety. This will be particularly important where the Christmas party is held at the employer's own premises. The employer should carry out an assessment of the potential risks before the event is held, check where the first aid box is kept and that it is well stocked and, during the event, keep a watchful eye out for any unacceptable behaviour. There may also be insurance concerns for the employer to consider.

### *Sickness Absence*

Another policy worth reviewing is the sickness policy. There is the potential for employees being absent from work the next day or coming to work in an unfit state (e.g. tired or suffering from a hangover), due to the activities of the evening before. Employers should review their sickness absence policies and be clear with their employees as to exactly what is expected of them and what will not be tolerated. They must also be sure to apply their sickness policies fairly across all their employees. Depending on the circumstances, an employer may have to consider taking disciplinary action and should refer to its disciplinary procedure for guidance.

When considering all of the above, employers must always be careful to apply all of the policies referred to above in a consistent and clear manner to all employees or they could face a discrimination claim.

**Wishing you a happy and healthy festive season**

If you would like more information on the above or any related matter, please contact a member of Rooks Rider Solicitors' Employment team.



Amanda Pullinger  
Senior Associate, Head of Dispute  
Resolution and Employment  
[apullinger@rooksriver.co.uk](mailto:apullinger@rooksriver.co.uk)  
+44 (0)20 7689 7180



Aaron Heslop  
Solicitor  
Dispute Resolution and Employment  
[aheslop@rooksriver.co.uk](mailto:aheslop@rooksriver.co.uk)  
+44 (0)20 7689 7209



Rooks Rider Solicitors LLP  
Challoner House  
19 Clerkenwell Close ■ London ■ EC1R 0RR

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