

Employee Wellbeing: Alcohol and Office Parties

Institute of Business Ethics

December 2014

OBJECTIVE:

The report was produced in order to help organizations ensure that their office parties are in line with ethical values without ruining the festivities.

KEY FINDINGS:

- In 2011, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that up to 40% of accidents at work involved or related to alcohol use.
- Up to 17 million working days are lost each year because of alcohol related sickness, and the cost to employers of sick days due to alcohol is estimated at up to \$1.7 billion.
- Those who are employed, especially in office professions, are more likely to drink during the week and also to a greater extent than those who are unemployed or economically inactive.
- Organizations concerned with employee wellbeing should also consider how the stress of work can lead people to drink. As a result, managers need to be trained to be alert to how workloads can affect the state of mind of their employees.
- After-work drinking may be central to office social life, but such activity can promote overconsumption and even a feeling of being ostracized for those who do not partake.
- Poor behavior due to alcohol misuse can damage an organization's reputation or undermine trust and confidence in employees. Therefore, guidance in the form of a policy should be given to staff and employees.
- The provision of alcohol can help make office parties relaxed and enjoyable, but can also be what gives the office party its reputation as an environment for harassment, injuries, and gross misconduct.
- If an alcohol policy outlines employee expectations in the workplace, then the office party should apply the same principles.
- In the UK, legislation states that the office Christmas party, regardless of venue, time, and location is an extension of the normal working environment. Therefore, employers could have liability for the conduct of their employees at office parties.
- An ethical culture is one which applies the same principles to the way things are done whatever the situation. Good practice would be to ensure that the party is in line with the company's ethical values.
- The purpose of the office party is to have fun and celebrate the season and a hard year's work, not to provide the opportunity for employees to overdrink. Maintaining a free bar is unadvisable because it may encourage excessive alcohol intake and could cause professional and personal boundaries to be crossed.

- Organizations should provide sufficient alternatives to alcohol for employees who do not consume alcohol for personal or religious reasons.
- Organizations should also be vigilant about minors consuming alcohol and make sure they are not provided with any.
- A social media policy should be put in place, which is especially desired when employees may be tempted to post compromising photos online of the festivities.
- The organization should ensure that employees have a plan in advance of how they will be getting home prior to the office party. Employers should consider their responsibility if anything goes wrong at work functions, including the way home.

CONCLUSION:

Organizations have an overarching ethical responsibility to employees' wellbeing. An organization that wishes to do business ethically should apply ethical values to all activities, including the office party. Guidance about what behavior is expected helps to encourage employees to act appropriately while at work or at a party. Thus, protecting the company from reputation risks due to poor employee behavior and creates an overall ethical environment.

[Full Report](#)