

TUC / RoSPA Christmas safety guide

Office Party Planner

It's always safer to book your office bash at a hotel, bar or restaurant, where facilities are designed for people having a good time. But if like many workplaces you do end up hosting a Christmas do in the office, there are risks that people need to be aware of.

Decorations at work:

- Use a stepladder to put up decorations – there should be one somewhere in most offices. Never stand on a swivel chair, as it could send you spinning to the ground.
- Offices are crammed with electrical appliances, which could be a fire hazard if their air vents get blocked. Remember to hang any tinsel or garlands well away from lights and other sources of heat, such as computers.
- Don't obscure emergency exit signs with decorations. Newer staff and any party guests may not be familiar with your office's procedures for an emergency, so will rely on signs to find their way out of the building if anything happens.
- Make sure Christmas tree lights meet modern safety standards and aren't old ones, which could turn your tree and office into an inferno. Your company might not be insured for damage caused by non-tested electrical equipment. Check that tree lights are turned off when you leave the office, to avoid this being 'the last Noel' you celebrate in that office.
- Party balloons can cause severe reactions, potentially deadly, in people who are allergic to latex. Around 3.6million people in Britain suffer from some degree of latex allergy.
- Over 1,000 people were injured by Christmas trees in 2002, so be careful when putting them up. Make sure they are secure, and won't be knocked by people passing by or pulling cables.
- Not everyone celebrates Christmas or New Year, and it can be pretty stressful to feel pressurised into celebrating something that may be against your beliefs or face cries of "humbug", so a bit of sensitivity can go a long way.

- ❑ It might be best to leave out the mistletoe. (and not just because the berries are poisonous). Cases of sexual harassment at parties are often attempted to be excused as “a bit of fun” rather than a workplace issue. Case law suggests though that this is a very fine line. If a party is held at the employer's expense, and is clearly a works party, it's likely any harassment would be covered by sexual harassment at work rules. In any case, behaviour of this sort is unacceptable, particularly if people make it clear they don't like it. The excuse that "everyone else was doing it" is no defence either. The fact that other people behaved unacceptably doesn't mean it's okay in each case. Some people may not object, but that does not make it unreasonable for others to do so.

The office party:

- ❑ Notify your employers of what you're planning. Their responsibilities don't end at 5.30pm, so they could be liable for any accidents or damages if the premises or the event organisation are under their control.
- ❑ Involving safety representatives and office first-aiders might be a useful part of planning. A trained union safety rep will be able to spot any potential problems before they ruin the party.
- ❑ Make sure you and other party organisers know what the late night security arrangements for your office are. Some offices may lock doors and stairwells at night, which could cut off an emergency escape.
- ❑ Check you know where the nearest fire extinguishers are. There should be some in designated places in every workplace.
- ❑ If you're going to be serving alcohol at the party, make sure you've read your company's alcohol policy if there is one. You may need to make sure you have personnel department or your manager's agreement if your policy prohibits alcohol at work.
- ❑ Make sure floors are free from clutter and cupboards locked before the fun begins. Offices aren't renowned for soft furnishings, so tripping up could do someone a lot of damage.
- ❑ Office furniture isn't designed to be as sturdy as the furniture in your local pub, so dancing on desks could do them and you a lot of damage. Likewise, the boardroom table is meant for weighty documents, not overweight executives.
- ❑ Keep fresh party food in a fridge, and don't leave it out in a hot office all day. Remember to keep fresh and cooked meats separate. Prawn vol-au-vent poisoning could see half your colleagues off sick until the New Year.
- ❑ Use paper cups so that there's no danger from broken glasses - and keep drinks well away from electrical equipment. Move computers that might be within drink-sloshing range – they are alarmingly easy to wreck with a spill.
- ❑ Don't let off indoor fireworks – they're too dangerous for the office. The same goes for candles, flaming puddings, and all smoking.

Office fire alarms are generally placed everywhere and are very sensitive to all kinds of smoke, not just fires. Even the jolliest fire brigade isn't going to be in the Christmas spirit if they're called to put out a cigarette.

- Keep a close eye on those who may drink too much – alcohol makes some people aggressive rather than friendly. The party will be spoiled if it ends in a punch up or harassment complaint.
- Resist the temptation to photocopy parts of your anatomy – if the copier breaks, you'll be spending Christmas with glass in some painful places.
- Get colleagues to plan how they'll be getting home. Make sure people who normally drive to work go home by another mode of transport if they drink. Management can help by thinking ahead and ensuring people don't have to drink and drive - booking taxis or offering overnight stays can help.

But equally important - have fun. Remember, safety is not rocket science and a few simple steps like these mean you can have a great office celebration without any painful mishaps.

Following these guidelines should ensure 'peace at work, and good times for all staff'.

More info:

- workSMART guide to the pitfalls of working through the festive season:
www.workSMART.org.uk/xmas
- RoSPA occupational safety pages:
www.RoSPA.org.uk/occupationsafety
- TUC health and safety pages:
www.TUC.org.uk/h_and_s



You are now
entering an
office party zone.

Have a safe
Christmas.

WORKSMART
www.workSMART.org.uk

ROSPA
*The Royal Society for the
Prevention of Accidents*