

Merry virtual Christmas – alternatives to the annual Christmas party

As coronavirus cases are on the increase again and local lockdowns become more commonplace, localised and a daily moveable feast, the likelihood of a Christmas party seems increasingly very unlikely as we move closer towards the festive season. Whether you love or loath the annual knees up, it's time to think what businesses can offer as an alternative to try and maintain some Christmas spirit.

Here are some ideas to consider.

- Gift vouchers – gift vouchers have historically been a safe choice for employers wanting to reward their employees. Making sure you pick something that everyone can use over a longish timeframe is key here.
- Small gifts or hampers – the traditional mulled wine (or non-alcoholic equivalent), bottle of bubbly or Christmas biscuits are a nice treat, although you would need to consider postage costs and data protection issues of using home addresses for the remote workforce.
- Christmas Bonus (one off so as not to create an expectation or precedent) if the company can afford it.
- Sharing ideas; afternoon tea arriving at home for teams to share remotely via Teams or Zoom could be a good team builder and festive treat.
- An early finish/extra half day holiday.
- Online get togethers – there are many, here are some suggestions:
 - karaoke;
 - online quiz night;
 - murder mystery/escape rooms
 - 'Company Name's' Got Talent;
 - cook-a-long/Christmas themed bake off; or
 - wine/beer tasting, cocktail making (including non-alcoholic options).
- A rain check – a promise of a future event. Ask for suggestions of events that might be appreciated once restrictions are lifted and employees will have an event to look forward to.

Whether you select one or more ideas, or perhaps allow employees to select from a range of options, it is important to let your employees know that they are valued and that you still wish to mark the occasion, albeit in a different way this year.

In a 2020 survey McKinsey reported that while organisations facing tightened purse strings may not be able to reward employees financially right now, they can potentially achieve a 55 percent improvement in engagement by addressing employees' need for work recognition through nonfinancial means. How about creating an on-line awards ceremony to celebrate the successes of this most extraordinary of years?





Remember, if you opt to have an online event your employees will be joining from home, so all content should be family friendly! It is also worth remembering that all of the normal workplace etiquette and workplace conduct standards should apply. Zoom and Teams meetings can sometimes feel quite informal, but these events are still work events and managers should role model behaviour that is acceptable in the workplace.

Recently, it was reported in the national press that an advertising boss was dismissed after taking his webcam in a lavatory during a video call as a 'joke'. The incident is believed to have sparked a complaint leading to an investigation and then a dismissal. The Group's CEO reiterated to all staff in an email after the event "We believe everyone should experience an inclusive and respectful workplace culture. Inappropriate or offensive behaviour is not tolerated and when we see any employee breach our code of conduct, we take swift action".

On a practical note, employers should also always ensure that gifts/events are fully inclusive, if you do opt for vouchers or gifts, you should be aware of your tax obligations as well as your data-protection obligations in using or sharing employee addresses with third party suppliers or event organisers - 'express consent' from individuals may be required if your existing data protection policies do not cover it.

