

Creating an inclusive Christmas experience in the workplace

For many people, Christmas is something they look forward to all year long: the prospective of celebrating the festive season with work colleagues followed by times with friends and family is something that keeps many motivated in the shorter and darker winter days. However, Christmas can also be one of the most excluding times of the year for many, and it can also have a negative impact on mental health. This factsheet provides top tips to ensure an inclusive Christmas experience for employees within the workplace.

Christmas is a great opportunity to engage with employees

Christmas is an excellent time to reinforce inclusion within an organisation. It is a time for reflection, celebration, and socialising. Use this as an opportunity to reinforce the company's commitment to providing an inclusive environment for all employees.

It is an opportunity to remind everyone of the organisation's values, to bring people together and perhaps cheer up someone who may be struggling with the time of year, or even to encourage teams to participate in volunteering – an opportunity for team bonding and giving back to the community.

Christmas is not a magical season for everyone

Christmas can be an emotionally charged experience for many people. It is a time when most of the Western world is encouraged to stop and reflect on the year that is about to end, and the year that is about to begin, and that can be an emotionally triggering experience for many.

Remember that some colleagues may be experiencing a difficult time during this time of the year – some may be away from their families, some may have lost loved ones, some may be experiencing financial difficulties. Each experience is very personal and individual.

So, during this time, be mindful of supporting employees' mental health. It can be a good time to direct people to mental health resources, interact with mental health first aiders, and encourage help from employee networks. Make sure to encourage colleagues to check in on one another.

Create a safe space for all religions, all year round

In a country of predominantly Christian faith such as the UK, Christmas tends to be regarded by the majority as the 'default' religious celebration, and as a society, it is hardly encouraged to consider that not everyone celebrates Christmas or follows the Christian faith.

Any employer seeking to be truly inclusive must recognise the calendar of all religious observances, celebrations, and festivals all year long, and ensure that employees feel their faith is represented, acknowledged, and respected.

When it comes to the Christmas season, not everyone will be celebrating or even observing Christmas in the same way that many Christians do – but that does not mean that people will not appreciate and look forward to some of the Christmas rituals: such as hanging Christmas lights, the staff Christmas party, or gathering with family or friends.

It is critical to avoid making assumptions about how people feel about or celebrate Christmas. It is also a chance to consider what opportunities the organisation is giving colleagues of all faiths to celebrate and observe the religious celebrations that are important to them.

Flexible Leave

A consideration for being inclusive to all is to allow employees to use the traditional Christmas shutdown leave at a different time in the year. This can support employees who would prefer to keep busy during this time, and also offer those who celebrate other religious holidays to take time off at another time of the year, that may be more significant to them.

Hosting an inclusive Christmas party

The end-of-year Christmas party is one of the great traditions in the UK - adored by some, feared by others! It is an environment in which some work dynamics and relationships are allowed to play out in a more casual setting, and sometimes with alcohol involved.

Employers need to remember that, even if taking place after hours and in different venues, these events are an extension of the workplace, and that the laws and legislation of the Equality Act still apply. Below are some guidelines on what to consider when planning a Christmas event, so that everyone who attends feels comfortable.

Invitation

To be inclusive, ensure that invitations are sent to everyone in the organisation, however, do not expect that everyone will want to attend the Christmas Party. Christmas is a Christian holiday, therefore may not be celebrated by everyone.

When sending out invitations, give enough notice and ensure all part-time workers are aware of the date. If any staff are on maternity, paternity, or adoption leave at the time of the party, make sure they have also been invited. It is best to give all employees the chance to say no to the invitation, rather than presume they will not want to attend.

Save the date

Dates can affect whether employees are able to attend, and to avoid any discrimination, consider the following questions:

- Is it in a school holiday?
- Does it coincide with any other religious festivals?
- How many employees will be able to attend after hours? (Impacting parents/carers)
- Is the day suitable for part-time workers?

Financial implications

With the cost-of-living crisis having a significant impact on disposable income, be up front about any financial costs associated with the celebrations, that will not be covered by the organisation. Consider providing more affordable options in terms of location, food options, and travel requirements, or even consider hosting events on-site as an alternative / another option. This could also be during working hours, allowing staff to attend during their workday if possible.

Alcohol

Alcohol can have an impact on whether some employees attend, so it is always best to inform staff if there will be alcohol at the party. As well as this, make sure that there is a range of alternatives to alcohol. If possible, consider whether the party can be held in a restaurant instead of a pub/bar, or consider the option of an activity as an alternative to a party or meal.

Food

If food is being provided, consider all religions and all dietary requirements. If the party will be at an external venue or catering is being provided, ensure that there is a variety of options. It is always best to ask employees about their dietary requirements in advance.

Location

If celebrations are happening away from the office, employers have a duty of care to ensure that the location has suitable access and facilities for disabled employees. Again, asking employees in advance if they have any accessibility requirements can help with planning.

Plus ones

If invites are being extended to employees' partners, consider those who are not married or those in same gender relationships/marriages. You could also offer employees to bring a close friend or family member for instance.

Safety Measures

Christmas parties are not for everyone; some employees may not feel safe or comfortable being surrounded by a large crowd, and it can be an anxiety-inducing experience (even more so since the pandemic). It is important that no one feels obligated to attend such events. Perhaps consider more "low-key" alternatives to celebrations that may appeal to employees who do not wish to go out and celebrate.

Organisations should also provide employees with information on Health & Safety guidelines for the event, including what the organisation is doing to keep employees safe and what all employees should do to keep each other safe.

If alcohol is being served at the party or if the party is due to finish late, the organisation has a duty of care to make sure employees get home safely. Book taxis in advance for employees who have further to go to get home and do this in advance of the party. If this is not possible, ensure the Christmas party ends before public transport closes and/or taxis are available near the venue.

Dealing with absences

Holding a party during the working week can create problems with employees requesting time off or not turning up for work the next day. Prepare for this by ensuring all employees know that if they have not requested the day off, they are expected to be at work the following day. It may also be a possible consideration for employees to use flexible hours and/or work from home options. Ask employees whether they plan to take leave so managers can make sure they allocate leave in a fair way, to ensure work / duties will be covered.

Staying clear of employment tribunals

Misconduct

Although a party may be outside of work premises, it is still considered a work-related event. Inform employees prior to the party that they are expected to behave in an appropriate way. Remind employees that disciplinary sanctions at work can follow from misconduct (including drunken) and inappropriate behaviour. It is important to note that employers can also be liable for employees' actions during a Christmas party.

Harassment

The Equality Act 2010 defines harassment as “unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual.” For example, an unwelcome invitation under the mistletoe from anyone in an organisation can result

in said person being liable for a harassment claim under the Equality Act 2010. Employers can also be held liable; please refer to The Equality Act 2010 for further information.

Resources:

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/how-to-be-inclusive-at-work-this-christmas/>

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/understanding-christmas-time-for-people-of-faith-in-your-workplace/>

<https://www.hrzone.com/engage/employees/making-a-modern-day-christmas-story-more-inclusive>

<https://www.hr-inform.co.uk/news-article/have-an-inclusive-christmas>

<https://www.nelsonslaw.co.uk/christmas-in-the-workplace-employer-risks-and-responsibilities/>

<https://www.springouselaw.com/christmas-parties-at-work-what-to-watch-out-for>