

Playing It Safe During the Holidays

As the holiday season nears, your business will have new safety considerations to confront.

From holiday parties and risk of electrical shock to fires and trips and falls, companies have a set of safety and risk management challenges that may not be present during most of the year.

Decorations present their own set of safety challenges, and so does a company party. To ensure your staff's and visitors' safety, and reduce your liability, consider the following:

Safety while decorating

Keep all relevant OSHA regulations in mind when decorating your workplace: both when in the process of decorating and making sure you don't create new safety hazards that will last for the duration of the month.

When your staff are decorating the office, ensure that they stick to the same safety guidelines that they would otherwise follow:

Ladder safety — Make sure that your employees don't stand on tables, desks or rolling desk chairs when hanging lights or other decorations. Insist that they use ladders and that they have a partner to hold the ladder when they are working on high.

Keep walkways unobstructed — You may have boxes of Christmas decorations that you bring out every year, or you may purchase new decorations too. When employees are decorating, ensure they keep all walkways free of wires, cords, boxes or any of the material you are putting up. When people are working in a disorderly fashion, they can easily trip and fall.

Install wisely — Also make sure that your employees do not put up decorations in a way that can impede movement of your workers or office visitors, or create trip hazards or expose staff to getting caught in the decorations.

Unobstructed exits — Do not place any type of decorative items in exit corridors or on sprinklers. It's essential to verify that none of your decorations block exit signage or fire safety equipment.

Office parties

If you're throwing an office holiday party, your biggest concern should be potential liability from labor laws and liability if alcohol is served.

Consider the following tips to ensure that festive cheer doesn't turn into a legal nightmare:

Limit your employer liability — Make sure that the party is not tied to any specific religious tradition and is referred to as a "holiday party."

Apply your workplace policies on behavior, including those on violence, harassment, discrimination and general code of conduct, even if you've chosen a venue other than your workplace. Prior to the event, let employees know the standards to which they will be held.

Avoid activities or items such as mistletoe, a game of Twister, or inappropriate music that could lead to physical contact, unwanted social pressure or inappropriate conversation.

Take any complaints stemming from the party seriously. As you normally would with any other incident, document, investigate and take appropriate action.

Alcohol at parties — Alcohol is a liability, so you should carefully think about whether you should serve it. Consider:

- Hiring professional bartenders who have their own insurance and are certified for alcohol service. Speak with the vendor to determine what protocols it uses to keep from serving minors and others who are visibly intoxicated.
- Offering an array of non-alcoholic beverage choices.
- Not having an open bar. Instead, hand out drink tickets to control consumption.
- Stopping serving alcohol at least an hour before the event ends.
- Serving food for party-goers to munch on, in order to slow absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream.
- Giving a supervisor or manager the authority to cut off the serving of alcohol to anyone who is intoxicated.
- Providing alternative transportation, which may include free cab rides.

The takeaway

The holidays are fast approaching, but if you get an early start on planning for them you can keep safety top of mind to ensure nobody gets hurt and your firm doesn't get sued.

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