

## **Throwing a Summer Party at Your Company? Be Careful – They’re Not Always The Picnic You Think They’ll Be.**

When summer rolls around, many companies celebrate by throwing a party or picnic to boost morale, and to prove they’re not just “all business”. Depending on the size of your organization, this gathering could be held at a local park, an employee’s home, or a nearby open space. While celebrating outside of the office is a great way to bring people together and make your company a fun place to work and play, holding such celebrations is not without risk.

As an employer, will you be held responsible if the gathering is at your place of business? Should you have it elsewhere? Should alcohol be served? Should family members be allowed to attend or does that just increase your liability? What about attendance – do you require it or leave it up to the employee? If the event is held after work hours and the employee voluntarily decides to not attend, are they required to use vacation time or take the time out of the office unpaid? There are a lot of factors to consider. You want to engage your employees outside of the office, but don’t want to leave yourself open to a lawsuit in the process. What factors should you keep in mind when pulling the annual summer soiree together?

The event should be geared toward social goals and not work-related goals. If an employee is injured or feels he or she has been hassled or treated unfairly, you could be held liable if your event is deemed specifically work-related. Keep things social by doing the following:

- Be sure employees know the event you are holding is voluntary. If you require attendance, it’s still considered work-related.
- It’s a good idea to include family members or at least significant others if possible; but it’s not required. This further emphasizes the “social” part of the gathering.
- Hold your celebration away from the office and, if you can, during non-working hours so that staff members identify the time with leisure.
- Choose venues and activities that appeal to a variety of interests so that no one feels left out or unfairly targeted. You may want to steer clear of spots like bars, places to gamble, and venues with blatant religious or political affiliations.
- Avoid serving alcohol if possible, or consider limiting its consumption. Having a plan in place for employees who consume too much is always wise. If alcohol is served, we recommend posting a sign stating that only those employees Age 21 or older will be served.
- Remind employees before the event to remember to treat each other with respect and dignity, but that they are also there to have fun and to relax and connect. Involving employees in the planning and running of the event is also a nice way to get them invested in it.
- Be sure to acknowledge and follow up on any claims of inappropriate behavior or injuries related to your gathering.

While there are stories of company summer picnics that have gone terribly wrong, there are many, many more organizations that have been able to hold a truly enjoyable annual event. By recognizing your risks, taking steps to keep your celebration a voluntary social event that aims to include all and exclude none, you can reduce your liability and enjoy the event as it was supposed to be enjoyed – as a chance to bring staff members together when the weather’s nice for fun, laughter and good times outside of the office.

For additional information and advice, contact McCloskey Partners today. We can help your small business thrive.

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