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### **Celebrating the Season**

It's the most wonderful time of the year! At least that's what many consider the holiday season that is just around the corner. This may not be the sentiment that human resource and management professionals share when they find themselves in charge of the annual company holiday event. For many reasons, organizations have either decided to greatly reduce or completely eliminate the festivities.

According to the 2006 Holiday Study from Hewitt Associates, company celebrations continue to be popular, with 65% of organizations planning to host a party, down from 74% in 2005. Of these, 23% will spend \$5,000 or less on their parties, 27% will pay between \$5,000 and \$20,000 and 11% will spend between \$20,000 and \$30,000.

Of those that offer holiday parties, 7% indicated they will direct some or all of the money they would have spent on a holiday party to charity, the same as 2005. According to the survey, 57% of companies hold holiday parties after work hours, 63% hold them at offsite locations and 55% allow employees to bring significant others. The average attendance for holiday parties is 64% of employees.

With budgets that typically run into the thousands of dollars, it's not surprising that holiday celebrations may be one of the first areas to cut back. If the budget is tight and you would still like to spread some holiday cheer to your employees, keep these budget-conscious ideas in mind:

- Forego the dinner and cocktails for an extended catered or pot luck lunch at the office.
- Replace a sit-down meal with a more casual after-hours party with appetizers and/or cocktails.
- If employees' families are normally on the guest list, change it to an employee-only event. This gives colleagues an opportunity to get to know each other in a more relaxed atmosphere.
- Allow employees time off to participate in area holiday programs or charitable events.
- Sponsor a needy family in your area to make the holiday one of giving instead of receiving.

Aside from budgets, many companies also worry about the message they may be sending by holding a holiday event. Holiday parties are normally considered morale boosters, but could have the opposite effect, especially if the organization has recently gone through tough financial times that resulted in layoffs. However, if employees have recently been let go, sponsoring an organization or family in need may be just the thing to lift spirits.

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## Potential Liability Issues

If your organization does decide to host a holiday party, be sure that potential areas of liability are discussed and resolved prior to the celebration. Employers hosting informal or formal office parties where alcoholic beverages are consumed may be liable for any harm caused by intoxicated employees, particularly if employees drive home from the party. In addition, alcohol may create an environment in which harassing behavior is more likely due to relaxed inhibitions. Employers that host holiday parties can minimize these risks by:

- Not serving any type of alcoholic beverages.
- Requiring employees to pay for all alcoholic drinks.
- Ensuring that intoxicated employees are not served. If the event is held offsite, most bartenders will have no problem addressing this issue.
- Hiring a professional bartender to serve drinks so that each drink has a measured amount of alcohol in it. This will also assist in ensuring intoxicated employees are not served.
- Allow each employee only one or two drinks for the evening. Consider utilizing drink tickets that must be presented before an employee is served.
- Offering bar services for only a short time, such as during a happy hour or closing the bar well before the party ends.
- Providing food throughout the party as eating while drinking alcohol slows absorption.
- Publicizing a designated driver program in advance of the party or offering free taxi service to employees who cannot drive themselves home.
- Holding the party at a hotel and reserving a few rooms for employees who may be unable to drive.
- Ensuring that a responsible, sober manager or human resource professional is monitoring the party to identify concerns before they become problems.

No matter what type of holiday celebration your company enjoys, don't let the upcoming season catch you off guard. Before you plan this year's event, take the opportunity to reflect on past successes and failures. This will assist in creating a positive, memorable event for your employees, not one that lives in infamy.