

5 tips for planning a cancel-proof and flexible work Christmas party

The emergence of the new COVID variant Omicron has thrown a curveball on Britain's festive celebrations this year, once again creating a major pause for thought.

The nation barely had a chance to dust off those Christmas jumpers – let alone crack out the reindeer antlers, or order Prosecco in bulk – before a new strain of coronavirus hit home, causing 52% of UK workplaces to cancel their office party plans.

With government ministers warning that major corporate bashes may be a no-go, companies including Google and the BBC are hastily pulling the plug on big end-of-year events. Still others, such as Deloitte and PwC, are opting for smaller, department-based parties.

This moment of reckoning isn't just about stemming the spread of Omicron, however. It also reflects a wider issue. With 84% of UK businesses planning on having a flexible or remote workforce post-pandemic, hybrid working habits are here to stay.

That means it's more crucial than ever to navigate what experts are terming an "organisational culture crisis", by bringing remote and in-office workers together. The office party isn't disappearing altogether – instead, like the rest of post-pandemic office life, it's evolving.

Creating an inclusive approach is therefore key, as is a fun and flexible party

structure. Here's how to get started on a celebration that all your employees can enjoy – however they feel about in-person mixing.

Make an effort to include everyone in your plans

Planning a celebration that suits everyone in your team is a tricky business, even in non-COVID time. You can begin by asking everyone their opinion on what they think will work best. According to 2018 research from Facebook, employee surveys are still one of the best ways to measure engagement. They give team members a chance to be heard without putting them on the spot at the end of a meeting, or on a group-round email.

With this kind of poll in place, you can read the room as to where to focus the bulk of your event (in-person or virtual) – and also solicit thoughts on lots of other details. Survey can cover everything from favourite food to most convenient timings, whether or not to invite family members and what hygiene steps to those who do want to attend an event in-person (Aviva, for example, is asking Christmas party attendants to wear masks and take a COVID test).

Emphasise the role of personal choice

Personal choice is also central when it comes to this year's hybrid party. KPMG, for example, is at pains to stress that in-person gatherings should only go ahead if employees feel comfortable doing so.

The idea is that, no matter what people's preferences, they can participate freely in celebrations without being left behind. Take insurance company Phoenix Group, who this year are arranging a mix of in-person and virtual events, including "a hybrid evening of thanks" for all colleagues and their families.

Plan hybrid activities carefully

An event such as a chocolate-making workshop or a pub quiz can work really well in galvanising hybrid parties; but you need to be careful about logistics.

Your virtual party-goers, in particular, shouldn't be consigned as an afterthought; good technology is vital. Make sure you have the infrastructure in place – including internet stability, and robust sound and visual channels – on any live streaming that you do. You may even want to hire a hybrid event platform to help with this feat.

It's also worth thinking about smaller details that can unite your team, such as a shared playlist that includes contributions from everyone, or a costume theme that people at home can participate in too.

Equally, a hybrid activity may be augmented between off- and online worlds. A live band is an obvious advantage for people attending a *Christmas* bash in person, but opening up requests to people at home could level the playing field. If you have a special guest speaker, set aside a private Q&A for at-home participants only.

Ensure your caterer can work a hybrid party

Food, of course, is a core ingredient of a great event; and it's also brilliant for conjuring up a sense of togetherness. In *a recent study of 180 companies* by our team at Just Eat for Business, 52% plan on offering their employees food perks to develop the team dynamic.

Over 80% of businesses we surveyed also believe that it's "important" or "very important" to provide benefits that are equally accessible to their in-office and at-home employees.

To fulfil this demand, you need a caterer that can deliver meals or treats to multiple places, so that everyone can enjoy freshly-cooked pizzas, or exquisite boxes of macarons at once, in their homes or at an actual venue. Choose a company that has flexibility on these arrangements, too: it's wise to expect a fair amount of changes and even cancellations in line with developing events.

Coordinate your pre- and post-party perks

Last but not least, the ultimate hybrid party equals great perks. Let's imagine your party has a theme: you could send out dress-up accessories to those at home, along with accessories on the door, so there's every excuse to get involved.

You might also like to get your shindig going in style by organising a pre-party delivery of branded cupcakes or wine hampers (don't forget no-alcohol options). Again, small touches have the edge here. You could, for example, have an actual and virtual photo booth, then send round a link after showing the team in all their finery or with hilarious props.

The office party in a COVID era is different, but maybe that's not altogether a bad thing. Long before the pandemic started, one in four of us dreaded the annual Christmas party, and 90% would prefer a bonus or extra day of holiday instead, given the choice.

Maybe then, this step-change is our cue to think about the office party culture more widely. In an age of "the great resignation" where employees hold all the cards, the smartest leaders will win over their teams with a new, inclusive style of event that everyone can participate in. An event, in other words, that people actually *want* to attend.

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