TOP 12 TIPS FOR AVOIDING HOLIDAY PARTY HEADACHES

by Brian L. McDermott (Indianapolis) and Amanda C. Couture (Indianapolis)

The holiday season is upon us once again. Many employers will cap off the year by hosting holiday parties to show appreciation for their employees and to provide an opportunity for socializing outside of the workplace. While these parties can serve as a boost to morale, party hijinks can also lead to employment law issues such as sexual harassment, social-host liability, and religious discrimination. So whether you’re throwing an end of the year bash or looking ahead to the 2018 company picnic, make sure your party planning includes safeguards so you don’t face legal drama later.

Here are our top 12 tips for a holiday party the lawyers will never hear about.

1. Make it a holiday party, not a Christmas party, and keep decorations secular. With a diverse workforce, it’s important to include employees of all faiths.

2. Don’t force employees to attend a holiday party. Not everyone celebrates the holidays, and some of your employees may want to opt out.

3. Inform your employees ahead of time that what happens at the holiday party does not “stay” at the holiday party. Normal workplace rules about harassment and professionalism apply. If sexual harassment occurs at the party, investigate it promptly and thoroughly.

4. Ensure the party location is accessible under Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards.

And because alcohol is at the heart of so many holiday missteps, it gets the remaining eight tips.

5. If you’re serving alcohol, make sure your invitations specify that it is an adults-only event. Never serve alcohol to employees who are underage.

6. Be sure to serve food. Don’t let your employees drink on an empty stomach.

7. Discourage overconsumption by using a ticket system or having a cash bar. A daytime or weeknight event can also help to curtail overconsumption.

8. Consider hosting the party off company premises and hiring professional bartenders.


10. If heavy drinking is a possibility, provide a car service, taxis, or shuttles for your guests.

11. Instruct managers and supervisors that after parties aren’t for them. Supervisors and managers should be “on duty” during the party—intoxication is not permitted. Don’t let management serve drinks.

12. Invite guests. Employees are more likely to behave in front of their partners and dates.

Bonus Tip: Have fun. Throwing a holiday party is a nice way to acknowledge your team’s efforts and to enjoy each other’s company.

We wish you well this holiday season.
Overtime Appeal on Hold

On November 6, 2017, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit granted the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) motion to put on hold the DOL's appeal of a district court decision that invalidated controversial overtime regulations. The appeal will remain on hold pending the outcome of new rulemaking by the DOL, a final version of which could be months or even years away.

Arbitration at the Supreme Court

On October 2, 2017, the Supreme Court kicked off its October 2017 term by hearing oral argument on the legality of class action waivers in employment arbitration agreements. This case obviously will have a significant impact on employers so it is one that we are monitoring closely. Expect to see a decision issued sometime in January or February of next year.

Changes at the NLRB

On September 25, 2017, Republican management-side lawyer William Emanuel was confirmed to fill the last remaining vacant seat on the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), giving Republicans a 3-2 majority. This majority may be short-lived, however, as NLRB Chair Philip Miscimarra notified the White House in August of his intention to leave the Board when his term expires in December, rather than seek reappointment to a second term. Finally, General Counsel Richard Griffin's term expired on October 31, and his replacement, Peter Robb, was confirmed by the Senate on November 8.

DACA Rescission

On September 5, 2017, the administration rescinded the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA was instituted in 2012 and allows undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children to apply for deportation relief and work authorization. Civil rights groups and business advocates are pressuring Congress to provide a legislative solution to the matter by the time the six-month phase out period expires in early March 2018.

Affordable Care Act Developments

On October 12, 2017, President Trump issued an Executive Order expanding existing alternatives to Affordable Care Act (ACA)-covered health plans—such as association health plans—with the stated intention of providing consumers with more options. Later that same day, the president announced that he intends to cut off all future cost-sharing reductions paid to insurers that sell on the ACA market exchanges.

Wellness Programs

Following an August order from a U.S. District Court judge, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) will reconsider its 2016 changes to its Americans with Disabilities Act and Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act regulations relating to employer wellness programs. In a September 21, 2017 status report filed with the court, the EEOC stated that it intends to issue a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking by August of 2018 and a final rule by October of 2019 (with a probable effective date of early 2021).

Disability Claims Procedure Regulations

On October 12, 2017, the DOL issued proposed regulations that would delay, until April 1, 2018, the effective date of the final regulations issued last December for disability benefits provided under retirement plans or welfare benefit plans.

H-1B Premium Processing

On October 3, 2017, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced that premium processing will now be available for extensions of H-1B status, the last category of petitions that hasn’t been available for premium processing treatment.
Alabama

The Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals recently held that the federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA) protects nursing mothers against post-pregnancy workplace discrimination. With its decision, the Eleventh Circuit became the second federal appellate court to answer that question in the affirmative, with the Fifth Circuit having done so in 2013. Hicks v. City of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, No. 16-13003 (September 7, 2017).

Illinois

Illinois’s Responsible Job Creation Act, which will become effective June 1, 2018, amends the Day and Temporary Labor Services Act with the goal of strengthening staffing industry regulation. Among other obligations, the Act imposes, on day and temporary labor service agencies, an obligation to “attempt to place a current temporary laborer into a permanent position with a [third-party] client when the client informs the agency of its plan to hire a permanent employee for a position like the positions for which employees are being provided by the agency at the same work location.”

Minnesota

The Minnesota Supreme Court recently issued a decision that may have effectively abrogated the long-standing rule of “employment at will” in Minnesota. By creating a claim for retaliation under the Minnesota Fair Labor Standards Act (MFLSA)—a statute which does not contain an express retaliation provision—a 5-2 majority of the court held that other provisions of the MFLSA could be read to permit a restaurant employee who refused to share tips in apparent violation of the law (and who was later fired) to sue for wrongful discharge under the statute. Burt v. Rackner, Inc., No. A15-2045 (October 11, 2017).

Pennsylvania

The Third Circuit Court of Appeals recently considered whether a Pennsylvania employer’s failure to compensate employees for periods of 20 minutes or less when they were relieved of all work-related duties violated the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The Third Circuit held that the FLSA requires employers to compensate employees for breaks of 20 minutes or less, and rejected the employer’s contention that under its “flexible time” policy, such non-work periods did not constitute breaks within the meaning of the law. Secretary United States Department of Labor v. American Future Systems, Inc., No. 16-2685 (October 13, 2017).

California

On October 15, 2017, Governor Jerry Brown signed Senate Bill 396 into law. California employers with 50 or more employees currently must provide two hours of sexual harassment training for supervisors every two years. Beginning January 1, 2018, the two-hour harassment training must include components on harassment based on gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. The training must include specific examples of such harassment.

Louisiana

On November 1, 2017, the Louisiana Court of Appeal, First Circuit affirmed the district court’s finding that Executive Order JBE 2016 – 11 was unconstitutional. The executive order sought to protect lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender individuals, among other protected classes, from discrimination by state contractors. The court found that the Executive Order was an “unconstitutional interference with the authority vested solely in the legislative branch of our state government by expanding the protections that currently exist in anti-discrimination laws.”

New York

On November 6, 2017, Mayor de Blasio signed New York City Council legislation Int. 1313-2016 (also referred to as Int. 1313-A or the Earned Safe and Sick Time Act) into law, expanding the New York City Earned Sick Time Act. The new law will allow employees to take “safe” time related to family offense matters, sexual abuse, stalking, and human trafficking. While the safe time expansion does not expand the number of hours an employer is required to provide to employees, it significantly expands the permissible uses for safe/sick time. The new law is set to take effect on or about May 7, 2018.

North Carolina

Starting December 31, 2017, the North Carolina Industrial Commission will have a permanent Employee Classification Section responsible for taking complaints about and facilitating the sharing of information among state and federal agencies regarding the misclassification of employees as independent contractors. The recently enacted Employee Fair Classification Act (EFCA) codifies provisions of an executive order signed in 2015 and, for the first time, requires employers to report their compliance in properly classifying employees with state occupational licensing boards and commissions.

Puerto Rico

In light of the state of emergency in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, the Puerto Rico Department of Treasury released Administrative Determination No. 17-21 (AD 17-21), which provides guidance on the taxation of disaster-related monetary payments and interest-free loans made by employers. Disaster assistance payments, which meet the requirements of AD 17-21, are not includable in an employee’s taxable income and, thus, are exempt from Puerto Rico income tax. Employers must report such payments to the Puerto Rico treasury no later than January 31, 2018.

Washington

Washington State’s Department of Labor and Industries has now concluded its process for drafting and finalizing the regulations for implementing the state’s paid sick leave law, which becomes effective on January 1, 2018. Now employers can finish drafting legally compliant paid sick leave policies. The complementary enforcement regulations are still a work in progress and are not expected to be finalized until at least mid-December 2017.

Florida

Effective January 1, 2018, Florida’s minimum wage will be $8.25 per hour, which is approximately a two percent increase and is due to the change in the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Florida’s current minimum wage is $8.10 per hour. The minimum wage applies to all employees in the state covered by the federal minimum wage.
IS HARVEY IN YOUR WORKPLACE? WHAT EMPLOYERS SHOULD DO IN THE WAKE OF THE WEINSTEIN SCANDAL
A Q&A WITH KATHERINE DUDLEY HELMS AND BRIAN MCDERMOTT
by Jansen A. Ellis (Atlanta)

The Harvey Weinstein scandal focused a harsh spotlight on sexual harassment by those in positions of power. The resulting fallout inspired a movement that empowered many workers to come forward with their own—sometimes years-old—claims of harassment by senior executives or others. In the wake of this movement, what should employers do differently—or in addition to their usual policies and training—now? Katherine Dudley Helms, a shareholder in Ogletree Deakins’ Columbia office, and Brian L. McDermott, a shareholder in Ogletree Deakins’ Indianapolis office, offer their suggestions to employers on these important questions.

Jansen Ellis: Why do you think this is happening now?

Kathy Helms: Some of these things have gone on for a very long time and perhaps, had the conditions been right, the reports may have been made earlier. Had the current conditions not been right, these stories may not have come out. Also, I think there is safety in numbers so once the water began to seep through, the dam just broke. Perhaps the accused crossed the wrong people or no longer had the power to abuse people. I don’t necessarily believe that the people who actually engage in this type of behavior are smart enough to hide it. I just think they are powerful enough generally not to suffer the consequences—at least for a time.

Brian McDermott: This is about power and it can happen anywhere, in any industry. I do, however, believe it could be possible that this is the beginning of a movement that can change behavior going forward. That, of course, would be an extremely positive development.

JE: How do you prevent sexual harassment when it comes from the top of an organization?

KH: If there is a Board of Directors involved, it is their responsibility to appropriately address any such allegations/problems. The most difficult situations are when it is the owner of the company or a family member who is alleged to have harassed an employee(s). This type of situation can get very complicated. However, it is not up to the employee to protect herself/himself. No matter who the alleged perpetrator may be, it is up to the company to investigate and promptly and appropriately address the situation.

JE: How do you ensure that your harassment policy is more than just a piece of paper?

KH: A policy that is merely on paper is simply evidence against a company in a trial. All companies should make sure they have a comprehensive and effective harassment policy, educate all employees (periodically) on the policy, make certain that employees understand how to report harassment, and listen to employees who bring claims to determine if changes need to be made in the policy. I tell my clients that having a policy alone gets the company no points, and they better be able to articulate how that policy addressed the situation at hand.

BM: The best employers are able to demonstrate that they have a culture of compliance and of encouraging employees to report issues and concerns. They can also “walk the walk” in that they have an investigation procedure that is robust and can help weed out bad actors.

JE: What do you suggest employers do now to avoid a similar scandal in their workplace?

KH: Pay attention! We keep hearing in many of these reports of late that “everyone” was aware of what was happening. Pay attention to rumors and investigate and take action when appropriate. During the course of an investigation, I often hear that the alleged harasser was just kidding, and the person who was allegedly harassed laughed at the sexually explicit jokes, etc. The alleged victim may or may not have acted amused, but more often than not, the alleged victim is adamant during the investigation that the jokes or other actions were unwelcome at the time and he or she felt that this was obvious. The rule of thumb is that unwelcomed sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal, visual, or physical conduct of a sexual nature do not belong in the workplace—whether in a joking manner or otherwise.

BM: Work to get out ahead of any problems. Show compliance through leadership and communication to employees—for example, by communicating the message that bad behavior is not consistent with the company’s culture and will not be tolerated.
As a traditional labor practitioner, I spend a great deal of time with front-line supervisors, local human resources professionals, and plant managers asking them to tell me how their employees feel about workplace issues, union organizing attempts, new policies, proposals in collective bargaining, and leadership changes. The goal is to collect honest information, assess the situation, and advise the client on the root causes for the lapse in positive employee relations. When I talk with people, I must be careful to remember the acronym WYSIATI, both for myself and for the supervisors I interview.

WYSIATI stands for **What You See Is All There Is.** It is part of a theory, put forth by psychologist Daniel Kahneman, that our brains are broken into two systems. System 1 is the intuitive portion of our brain. It makes quick decisions, often with incomplete information. System 1 is very useful because it allows us to quickly assess risk and danger. For example, when you first meet someone, System 1 is working to give you an initial impression. Is this person dangerous? Is he friendly? Is he glaring at me because he wants to hit me or because I have broccoli in my teeth? The problem is we use System 1 as a crutch when we should really use System 2. System 2 is the logical portion of our brain. Unfortunately, our brains are lazy and System 1 is easy to access. We have to work harder to access System 2.

When we make decisions, System 1 only takes into consideration the things it knows, and uses those things to build a coherent story. System 1 does not assess the quality or quantity of that information before building the coherent story. Because the story sounds good in our minds, we believe it wholeheartedly. This leads humans to jump to conclusions based on incomplete information and, at the same time, feel very confident about those conclusions. This is one of the premises of Kahneman's famous book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow.*

Because people make quick decisions with System 1 based only on “What They See,” they tend to believe that “Is All There Is.” Individuals will intuitively take difficult, complex questions that would involve quite a bit of System 2 use, and substitute an easier question they can answer with System 1. For example, you might ask a supervisor if they know how employee X feels about a union organizing drive? The answer to the first question is much easier than the second one and System 1 can easily remember simple and intuitively substituting the easier question (Are they a good worker?) for the harder one (How do they feel about the union organizing drive?). The answer to the first question is much easier than the second one and System 1 can easily remember that employee X works hard and shows up on time.

By understanding WYSIATI, you can discuss issues with supervisors in a way that forces them to utilize System 2. Ask probing questions about the employee’s interests, lifestyle, work habits, and family life instead of questions about union support. It is always more useful to ask focused questions about an individual rather than broader questions. The next time you need to communicate with supervisors about issues in the workplace or employee opinions, remember, **What You See Is All There Is.** Start with the basic questions and build towards the larger one. Do not trust the supervisor’s snap reaction no matter how confident he or she is in the analysis. It isn’t that the supervisor is lying, or even necessarily uninformed. Our brains are designed to provide believable, coherent stories with incomplete information.

This approach will focus your supervisors on their employees and get them thinking about the factors that inform the employee’s decision. It also makes it much less likely that you will get a System 1 answer to a System 2 question. This approach also provides constructive feedback on the strength of your supervisory team. By learning what is important to your employees, you will also learn something about your supervisor’s level of engagement.

If a supervisor cannot tell me anything about his or her employees, such as what they like to do, what sports their kids play, what parts of the job frustrate them, what parts of the job they like, it tells me the problem may lie with the supervisor. When we are engaged, we make connections. Connections build trust, and trust is the cornerstone of any supervisor-employee relationship.

Frequently, when you ask the kind of question described above, what you get is the mental substitution of an easier question and answer. Often times, without thinking about it, a supervisor might respond, “Oh, he’s pro-company, he’s a good worker, and he always comes to work on time” or “He never complains about anything. He likes it here.” My father worked for 30 years as a union sprinkler fitter. He was never late, did his job efficiently and skillfully, and did not complain to the foreman, unless it was because the other guys on his crew were not pulling their weight. My father is an ardent union supporter. In my mind, there is little correlation between absenteeism or industriousness, and union support.

The supervisor, in part, is using a dated stereotype, but he is also simply and intuitively substituting the easier question (Are they a good worker?) for the harder one (How do they feel about the union organizing drive?). The answer to the first question is much easier than the second one and System 1 can easily remember that employee X works hard and shows up on time.

**When we are engaged, we make connections. Connections build trust, and trust is the cornerstone of any supervisor-employee relationship.**
More businesses than ever are sending people overseas. The rewards of developing new markets can be great, but the multitude of different legal systems means there are also bear traps to be avoided—especially on the human resources (HR) and employment law side. Fortunately, most of these traps can be avoided by forward planning and ensuring the employment engagement is on sound footing.

1. **Who is the Employer?**

Assignments may be to another entity, such as a new subsidiary company or to a company with which the employer does business. Where another entity is involved, consider which entity will be considered the employer. Frequently, an employer will generally continue as the employer unless there is a reason for it to be the host. It is important to be clear about which company is the employer in documentation and to ensure that the arrangement is followed in practice. It is required that with the employer dealing with matters like discipline, appraisals, and payroll. Confusion over which company is the employer can expose the parties to dual employment liabilities and dilute the main employer’s control over the relationship.

2. **Protection of Confidential Information and Customer Relationships**

The employee on assignment will be in a position in which he or she could potentially cause harm to both the main employer and host. The employer will hopefully have protection via appropriate clauses in an employment contract or some form of business protection agreement. However, it may have been drafted some years ago, and the assignment letter/agreement provides a good opportunity to rectify any defects. Note that none of this will provide protection to the host, and it may be sensible for the host to require the employee to sign a confidentiality and business protection agreement.

3. **Obligations Between the Main Employer and Host**

Consider whether an agreement between the main employer and the host is appropriate. Frequently, accounting firms will advise that the two organizations enter into an intra-company secondment agreement, setting out the business rationale of the assignment and allocating responsibility for costs and liabilities. These agreements often contain recitals specifically intended to protect one entity or the other from exposure under tax and other legal requirements.

4. **Taxes**

International employment tax rules are complicated. To be prepared, employers may want to talk to an internationally competent firm of accountants for advice about any obligations in relation to the employee’s personal income taxation and payroll obligations and to rule out any other taxation issues. Most employers will offer tax equalization to ensure their employees are no worse off in higher tax countries. This effectively means increasing the employee’s salary so that his or her take-home pay is the same as it was before the international assignment or has the same buying power in the host country.

5. **Immigration**

It goes without saying that the individual sent overseas for an assignment must have a legal right to work in the country in question. Proper immigration status is always an absolute requirement. Note that many countries require the employee to have a local employment contract as a precondition to receiving proper work authorization.

6. **Local Employment Laws**

Local employment laws vary considerably. It is vital to appreciate that for overseas assignments that go beyond temporary business trips, local employment laws will likely apply—even if the employer tries to apply the home country’s law in the relevant contract. Companies take a risk with their management time and money if they fail to ensure that assignment documentation and termination processes comply with local laws. For example, failing to provide a Flemish or French language version of an employment contract or assignment letter/agreement in Belgium can result in a void contract, with the result that the business protection clauses fail.

7. **Local Customs**

Employers will want to find out the local customs that may impact the working relationship. For example, some countries have 13-month payrolls to deliver extra salary at Christmas or for the summer holidays. Public holidays may also differ in the host country. The usual practice is to require the employee to take the public holidays recognized in his or her host country rather than his or her home country.

8. **Directorships and Other Positions of Responsibility**

Employers should carefully consider what they plan to bestow on an individual in the form of directorships, bank mandates, etc. In particular, give thought to what is involved in removing these responsibilities and appointing a replacement if the need arises. This issue can prove very problematic at the time of what may be an acrimonious departure.

9. **Practical Matters**

Employers may want to consider their employees’ family needs such as schooling, housing, and flights. Usually the main employer will make arrangements to ensure these matters are dealt with, perhaps using one of the many companies that specialize in such matters. These family considerations are usually the most important aspect of assignment negotiations for the employee, and being aware of them will help employers deal with negotiations—both at the beginning and end of an overseas assignment.

10. **Recordkeeping**

It may seem an obvious point, but employers should keep copies of any employment contract and assignment letter/agreement as well as relevant information such as the dates of lease renewals and the dates when equity vests.
Ogletree Deakins’ Mexico City office opened in September 2014, and is led by managing partner Pietro Straulino-Rodriguez. After the devastating earthquake hit Central Mexico in September of this year, Pietro and other lawyers from the Mexico City office spent countless hours helping others affected by the earthquake. Below we provide some must-know employment law facts, as well as interesting tidbits about the capital of Mexico (also known as the “City of Palaces”).

- In contrast to the U.S., Mexico does not have employment at will. Instead, employment relationships are governed by the employment stability principle, under which labor relations may only be terminated if just cause exists or via a negotiated severance payment.

- Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, is a three-day celebration that begins on October 31 and ends on November 2. As part of this tradition, families build altars known as ofrendas to honor their deceased loved ones. They add tokens and gifts such as calaveras (edible candy skulls), pan de muerto (a sweet bread), and the deceased’s favorite foods. The altar is also decorated with Aztec marigolds, colorful paper, and portraits of the deceased.

- Workers in Mexico are not classified as exempt or non-exempt. All employees have the same rights and are protected by Mexican labor and employment laws.

- The Frida Kahlo Museum is a must-see for fans of the artist. Also known as the Blue House for its cobalt blue walls, this historic house museum is Kahlo’s birthplace and childhood home.

- Employers in Mexico must pay employees a year-end bonus equal to at least 15 days’ salary.

- There are numerous festivals and parades throughout the year in Mexico City. One of the most famous is the Alebrije Parade, made up of giant papier-mâché sculptures of fantastic creatures inspired by the dreams of Mexican artisan Pedro Linares.

- Unlike in the U.S., where both federal and state laws apply to the employment relationship, there are no state or local employment laws in Mexico. Labor matters are governed by federal labor law, any applicable individual or collective bargaining agreement, social security law, and official standards (such as health and safety).
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March 9  New York  Managing a Workforce in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut
March 9  Las Vegas  Managing a Workforce in 2018
March 21  Detroit (Metro)  Employment Law Briefing
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April 11  San Diego  Employment Law Briefing
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April 12  Sacramento  Employment Law Briefing
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May 2018
May 8-9  Phoenix  Employee Benefits and Executive Compensation Symposium
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