

Even if COVID-19 Is a Party Pooper, Employers Find Ways to Celebrate

By Dana Wilkie | October 29, 2020 | SHRM



Because holding a workplace holiday party doesn't seem practical during a pandemic, managers are finding other ways to help their workers celebrate this year—including virtual gift exchanges, cooking classes and wine tastings.

"I would argue that it's never been more important to celebrate our accomplishments after what we've endured this year," said Taylor Paone, senior manager of employee experience and culture at DailyPay, a New York City-based company that provides software allowing employees and contractors early access to earned wages. "But of course, we are faced with the daunting challenges of how to celebrate while keeping employees safe. While nothing can entirely replace an in-person experience, these initiatives give employees the chance to bond and have a little fun."

High-End Holiday Gifts

Some managers have found ways to show their appreciation to workers who are still largely operating remotely.

At Chicago-based promotional products company iPromo, there's been a surge in corporate holiday gift orders, including pricey products like branded \$300 Apple AirPods and \$100 self-cleaning water bottles.

"Often, a high-end gift is actually less expensive, since a holiday party includes the cost of food, room rental, travel and entertainment," said CEO Leo Friedman. "While the social aspect will be missed, employees will appreciate the gesture, especially during such a tough year. Employees may appreciate a high-value gift that they will use often ... [over] a once-a-year party."

Other possibilities include virtual happy hours; dinner parties complete with all the ingredients to make a meal; and home entertainment packages that include games, movies and cookie-decorating kits.

Virtual Parties

This holiday season, Preciate Social—a Dallas-based company that offers virtual socializing products—is giving away 100 subscriptions to virtual holiday parties. Winners receive unlimited virtual parties for three months, a package that includes music customization (think holiday tunes), holiday background themes and icebreakers. Up to 50 people can attend the virtual event, which replicates the atmosphere of real-life business mixers.

Unlike traditional conferencing tools that are built solely for meetings and are designed so only one person can talk at a time—which is hardly ideal for large groups and business socials—Preciate Social's offerings are designed for socializing and team building. For instance, Preciate Social allows multiple conversations to take place simultaneously, just like they would at an in-person business party or social event. The technology allows those attending to move away or toward people to start a conversation, and to hear the background noise of other people chatting. Companies can even hire performers such as musicians and comedians to augment the event.

Such options are "very inexpensive compared to hosting a traditional, in-person holiday party," said Preciate Founder and CEO Ed Stevens.

"Workers appreciate virtual socials, even if they attend only for 10 minutes," he said. "It doesn't take a long interaction to further a connection between two people. A quick

hallway conversation or bumping into someone in the elevator—those are classic examples of connecting in an office. Since virtual socials can happen more often, and since anyone can participate no matter where they are, it just makes everything easier, faster and less expensive."

Culinary Delights

Rouxbe, an online culinary school, provides recipes and video instructions that teams can access as they gather for a virtual dinner-making event, with a coordinator providing a suggested list of ingredients and choosing the recipes and courses developed by a team of chefs and culinary school executives.

The Rouxbe platform includes access to hundreds of recipes to make a three-course meal—including an appetizer, main dish and dessert. Prior to the day of the party, employers can send workers a box of ingredients or a local grocery store gift card. At an agreed upon time, they can gather on Zoom to make the dishes, as well as cocktails, as a team.

"The venue and food cost alone [for an in-person party] certainly exceeds the cost of virtual experiences and employee gifts," Paone said. "Depending on the virtual experiences you choose, you're [only] paying for the items, for them to be shipped to each participant, and the costs that go into coordinating these events."

Perhaps one of the most appreciated holiday gifts during the pandemic is the gift of time, Paone said.

"Whether it's time with friends and family or time alone, there is nothing more precious than time," Paone said. "We actually have been giving our corporate staff 'Fall Friday' afternoons off, recognizing that Zoom fatigue and the solitude of working remotely is an ongoing challenge and we must encourage staff to step back from the computer and spend time doing activities that re-energize and recharge them."