

Organising the Best Event Ever!



#1 – Set the date (Start now!)

If you're organising an event around Christmas or end of financial year, you want to get a date pencilled in as early as possible to give yourself the most options for events and turnout. Christmas is a busy period, the busiest of the year for many people when it comes to social events, so diaries fill up fast (some companies even organise their party in January to kick-start the year and get better value for money).

- Send potential options for dates around the office to get a feel for the preferred date. The responses will also give you an indication of numbers for the event. Remember, you can't please everybody so it is usually best to go with 'majority rules' when choosing your date. Typically, Thursdays and Fridays are most popular, so earlier days in the week tend to work out cheaper – but don't expect a productive workforce during the days that follow.
- To ensure a good turn out send a 'save the date' calendar invite to everybody as soon as you've decided. At this stage it doesn't matter if you don't know any details about the event, it's more important to get as many people to the event as you can. To make life easier you should also request information on any special dietary requirements or allergies that you'll need to consider when selecting menus.

#2 – Know your numbers and budget

One of the key items that will drive the style of event will be the number of people. 5 -100pp, with a modest budget, you can probably handle on your own. Anything above that and you're probably better off working with an external Event Manager. You can still work closely with them, but they are the professionals and do this day in, day out. Just plan for their costs in your budget. Also make sure your event can accommodate changes in your numbers so you don't get caught out if they go up or down.

The size of your budget will ultimately have a huge impact on the style of event you organise, determining everything from the food and booze to the entertainment and choice of venue.

- Find out approximately how many people is expected at the event
- Find out how much money you have to spend including any Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) considerations (talk to your finance team / accountant). You need to know this as early in the process as possible so you don't start planning something completely unrealistic.
- Allocate the budget by what is most important to your group. This will depend on the type of company you work for and the expectations of the people you work with. For Christmas and end of financial year parties, this is a 'thank-you' to the staff, so should be organised for them and not to please directors.
- Leave some money aside as a back up. Unexpected costs can always crop up with any size of event, so don't splurge your entire budget straight away.

#3 – Establish the type of event you're organising

There is almost endless variety when it comes to the type of event that you can plan (particularly the larger celebrations like Christmas parties). It will be depend on many factors, including the location, budget, numbers attending and how much you want to be directly involved in planning and managing the event.

- Find out if management have any expectations on the style, time or other aspects of the event.
- Decide whether you are planning a daytime event, evening event or both and the duration
- Decide what the style and goals of the event are (e.g. to celebrate, bond as a team, work together better as a team, learning and development), outdoor vs indoor activities (consider possibility of rainy day or extremely hot days), appropriateness for all staff (e.g. fitness levels, universal appeal) – depending on the above, this may mean combining a number of activities and venues (e.g. team building fun activity followed by drinks and dinner). Escape Hunt is an indoor event combining fun as well as team building and lateral thinking skills and also have catering, drinks and gift packages available.

- ❑ Do you have the budget to accommodate husbands, wives and partners? These are the people who support your people so it's good to thank them if you can afford it – but don't compromise the quality of the event over it. You may also want to gauge whether or not your colleagues want partners to be involved or not.

- ❑ Bespoke or packaged event? If this sounds confusing, here is a breakdown:

Organising a bespoke event – this is where you start from scratch, finding a venue or using your own workplace (if you have the space) and booking, organising and bringing together different suppliers for all the elements involved such as activities, themes and catering.

Using what's available in your area – dinner in a local pub or restaurant is not uncommon for smaller companies, usually followed by a bar crawl or finding somewhere to dance the night away. You could investigate alternative ideas in your area combined with dinner and drinks, such as Escape Hunt (conveniently located in the CBD), city cruises, cookery workshops, cocktail making, going to a roller disco, ice skating, bowling or watching a show at the theatre.

Buying a packaged event – this is an 'off the shelf' event (e.g. Christmas party) organised by either a venue or a party planner and is usually offered for Christmas parties. Often they will present a theme across an entire venue or function room throughout December, with the same entertainment and the same menu being served to different companies and parties every night.

This option is ideal for large companies that don't have the time or budget to organise an event from scratch, so instead book out a pre-packaged night exclusively for their company.

For smaller workplaces there are shared event nights, where you buy tables at a large 'off the shelf' Christmas party, sharing the event with a variety of other companies. This is ideal for those that want the atmosphere of a larger event, but don't have the budget, time or enough guests to put something bespoke together.

If investigating these ideas sound like a lot of hassle you could contact an event company to do all the hard work for you, that way all you will have to do is select the best option. Some may charge for their services and others may just take a commission from the venue, event planner or the suppliers.

#4 – Source the venue

The earlier you book the venue, the better – unsurprisingly, good venues go quickly. As we said earlier, no matter how prepared you think you are, there is always someone out there even more organised.

- ❑ Identify suitable venues that have availability, are within budget and easily accessible for guests – the internet is your best tool for this. Request a quote from each based on your requirements.
- ❑ Make the most of the events team at the venue, they'll know the space really well and will have seen plenty of events there so don't be afraid to fire all your questions at them.
- ❑ If you have a number of options try to provisionally place them on hold.
- ❑ Organise site visits to work out the best option and take photos to help when planning the theme.
- ❑ Ask the venue's events team about what is available for you to use and what you will need to hire in, such as furniture, entertainment equipment, staff on the night, decorations and theming.
- ❑ Check that the venue will be willing to clear up afterwards, otherwise you may want them to hire in some extra help, rather than clear up yourself.
- ❑ If an overnight stay will be required, or you want to organise it as part of the overall experience, then find out about accommodation options at the venue or nearby.
- ❑ If you haven't had a confirmed guest list or are worried about 'no shows', ask if you will be able to book for minimum numbers and add guests later on.
- ❑ Before signing anything make sure you check back through the quote and ensure it includes everything you require and that there will be no hidden charges.
- ❑ Formally confirm the location and release any alternative venues on hold. Book accommodation if required.

#5 – Making it look pretty: theming

The theme is the heartbeat of your event and should be integrated throughout every aspect of the day or night.

- Choose a theme and research it thoroughly. Some popular ideas include traditional Christmas, vintage, 60s, 70s, 80s, quintessentially English, pantomime, circus, Chicago jazz, winter wonderland, ballroom, colours, film inspired, wild west, spy, Caribbean and Santa's workshop.
- Make a list of anything you would associate with the chosen theme. When doing this consider every stage of the event. This should include physical focal points such as the entrance, the bar, table centres and unique features in the venue, as well as the different stages of the event, for example, arrival, reception drinks, dinner, after-dinner dancing and drinking. You also need to account for any other elements of the festivities that can be included in the theming, such as dress codes for the guests and staff, choice of music, food and drink menus and any outdoor areas.
- Contact theming companies for inspiration and quotes.

#6 – Fill bellies: the food

Food is a key part of any party (particularly at Christmas) and can easily be incorporated into the theme you choose. For events like Christmas, don't feel like you have to stick with turkey, especially if you're planning to eat at a venue with a specialist restaurant. A traditional Christmas dinner done badly is worse than having no turkey at all. However, if you think turkey is important to your group then choose somewhere appropriate or hire in caterers that are geared up to cook and serve roast dinners and will do a good job.

- Depending on what type of venue you have chosen you will need to decide between using in-house catering (which will work out much cheaper) or hiring in external caterers. This will depend on whether the venue allows external companies to cater for events, the budget available and also the food reputation of the venue – if it's not broken, don't try and fix it so if your venue already serves good food then this will be the simplest and most efficient way to tackle the catering. If you choose Escape Hunt as your activity, we offer catering and in some branches drinks packages or BYO drinks.
- Choose how you would like the food to be served. For example, do you want pre-dinner nibbles placed on the tables or canapés taken round by waiting staff? Would you prefer a buffet or a sit down three-course meal with full silver service – and will this be a set menu or will guests need to choose beforehand?
- Consult with chefs and choose a style of food for the event, incorporating the theme where possible.
- Organise a vegetarian option if required and try to accommodate as many other dietary requirements as possible.
- Insist on a menu tasting, especially if you're booking for a large group. Food can make or break an event so it's important that you are confident in your choices.
- Confirm the menu.

#7 – Getting everyone in the party spirit: ordering the drinks

- Choose arrival drinks. For Christmas, festive favourites include Winter Pimm's, mulled wine, sparkling wine and Christmas cocktails, or you could even come up with a drink related to the theme of your night.
- Decide on whether you're going to pre-order drinks or pay for what is consumed on the night. If you are concerned about spiralling costs or making sure that everybody gets their fair share from the bar tab then you could narrow down the choices available or organise drinks vouchers to be given to the guests so that the budget isn't blown on Jäger bombs within the first hour.
- Choose how you want drinks to be served. Again, this will depend on how you choose to manage the allocation of the drinks budget but you will need to decide whether you want waiter service or for guests to order from the bar, or you could perhaps have drinks dotted around the venue or just set up in one place where your colleagues can help themselves.

#8 – Making the right noises: choosing the music

Dancing at a Christmas party is usually a must and it's the perfect opportunity for everyone to really let their hair down. But it does of course depend on the type of group you are catering for and how you want the night to pan out. But if music is key to your party then make sure it is done properly.

- Hire a DJ, musician or live band or put together a Christmas playlist to make sure you have music playing.
- Organise an independent sound system in other areas of the building being utilised so that music flows throughout the party.
- Coordinate between the venue, DJ and band to ensure you have all the kit required, such as stage, dance floor, sound systems and, lighting. Alternatively you may need to hire in some extra bits of kit, or for a smaller scale event then an iPod hooked up to the in-house PA or a decent stereo system might be all you need – just make sure your speakers are loud enough.

#9 – Book entertainment

The entertainment on the night can be one of the most talked about aspects of the whole event and is something that can really help bring people together and help iron out those potentially awkward moments of stilted work chat between colleagues.

- Choose the entertainment to suit your event. There is no shortage of options here with popular ideas including live performers such as comedians, jugglers, stunt shows, circus acts or after-dinner speakers. You could choose games such as casino tables, murder mystery, giant Jenga, air hockey, pool, arcade machines, fun fair favourites or even giant Scalextric. Other hits include cocktail flaring demonstrations, wine tasting and karaoke, while entertainment working the room often goes down well, such as table magicians, stilt walkers and caricaturists. Fireworks always help a party go with a bang too.
- Source relevant suppliers. You want to make sure you choose reputable suppliers and agree early on exactly what is involved as you are relying on them to ensure your guests are entertained.

#10 – Organise 'thank-you' speeches and awards

If you want the event to act as a thank-you to the staff then a nice way to thank everybody is by actually saying it.

- Ask a director or manager to deliver a short 'thank-you' speech and (if appropriate) give out a couple of awards to anybody who deserves to be recognised. Please note that any speech given at a event should be short, loud enough to be heard and not done too late – you want to ensure the speeches don't get too rowdy or out of hand and that they don't stop everybody from getting on and enjoying themselves.
- Coordinate between the venue, DJ and band to ensure they have a microphone that can be used for the speech. Alternatively you may need to hire in a PA and microphone – and make sure to check whether you need to bring your own extension cord.
- Order any awards, trophies and gifts if required, leaving enough time to get awards/trophies engraved. Make sure there is also somewhere safe to leave them or somebody is tasked with taking them all home if you don't trust your colleagues to remember theirs at the end of the night.

#11 – Adding that touch of sparkle: extra ways to enhance your event

Sometimes little changes can make all the difference. You want your event to be enjoyable, pleasant and memorable for all the right reasons. Here are some ideas for those little touches to help your event stand out:

- Upgrade the toilet facilities as much as possible. Buying fresh flowers, lighting scented candles, having good quality soap and adding nice paper towels (with a big enough bin for the used ones) are all simple to do but can make a world of difference.
- Hire a photographer. Many people will doubtless be snapping away on their mobile phones but hiring a professional will give you much better quality pictures and visual reminders of the event. Good shots can also be used on the company blog, website and social media, in marketing materials and put up round the office.
- Put together goody bags. These should be filled with genuine goodies that your staff will actually enjoy, so don't just cram them with company collateral, go for popular treats such as chocolates and wine.

- ❑ If security is required then make sure you book friendly staff. Those that will make your guests feel welcome on arrival and be friendly throughout the night will help make the whole event more pleasurable.

#12 – Visualise the event

When planning any event it is crucial that you get a clear picture of how you want things to work on the night, that way you can be prepared for all eventualities.

- ❑ Take some time out and visualise each stage of the event from a guest's point of view. Picture how you see the event unfolding, ensuring that you haven't left anything out, and note down all the timings as this will form the basis of your itinerary. Make sure you allow guests plenty of time to leave work and get ready for the event, build in time for late arrivals and plan plenty of time for all the food courses to be served.
- ❑ Find out when suppliers need access to the venue and confirm these times with your contact at the venue.

#13 – Organise transportation

Making sure people can get to and from the venue is important for ensuring that things run smoothly and the evening is as hassle-free as possible for the guests.

- ❑ Collect local taxi numbers and details on public transport for that night. Put details on one document and print copies out for when guests leave or circulate them in advance so people can plan ahead.
- ❑ Organise a coach if required and make sure you book it for suitable times so that people aren't left hanging around nor dragged away when the event is in full flow.

#14 – Invite the guests

- ❑ If you want to make sure people come then you'll have to give them all the details. It is important to plan the wording for the invitations and to make sure you include the following:
 - To | From | Date | Start Time | Finish Time | Reason | Theme | Venue Address | Format Of Event | Dress Code | Include Menus Requesting Guest To Choose (where relevant) | RSVP date

- ❑ Get invites designed that fit into your theme, either in an e-format that can be emailed out or printable versions that can be posted or delivered to your guests.
- ❑ Nominate reps in each department across the company to help you ensure invitations are delivered and that RSVPs and menu choices are all returned.
- ❑ Be prepared to chase guests for responses.

#15 – Create the table plan

Just like with a wedding, a table plan can be something of a tricky task to get right but it is worth the effort to make sure everybody gets the most out of the event – and that any awkward confrontations are avoided.

- ❑ Plan table arrangements so that guests can mingle with colleagues that they wouldn't usually get the chance to speak to. Print a large copy of the table plan to put up on the night to help direct guests to their seats.
- ❑ Order or make name cards for the tables.

#16 – Put together a full itinerary

Your itinerary is what will help you stay organised and ensure everything remains on the right track for a smooth-running event.

- ❑ Create one document that includes everything about the event. You may want both a digital copy and a hard copy. Make sure your hard copy includes the following:
 - Front: "If this document is found unattended please hand into reception." | Organisers name | Date
 - Inside: A complete breakdown of the event. It's a good idea to put this in a table format under the headings 'When' (timings), 'Who', 'What' and 'Where' (in the venue). Include contact names, mobile numbers and email addresses of everybody involved in the event, including the different suppliers. Any documents you've put together or collected such as menus or timings for entertainment should be kept with this document.

- ❑ Send a copy of the itinerary to everybody involved in running the event, including suppliers, venue managers and entertainers, and be sure to print a copy for yourself.

#17 – Managing the event

All this pre-planning is so that you can enjoy the event as well – although you will of course have to deal with any issues if they arise. But good preparation can help it run as smoothly as possible.

- ❑ Keep the itinerary with you.
- ❑ Introduce yourself to all suppliers, venues and entertainers at the start of the event, so that they know who you are and who to come to if they have any problems or questions.
- ❑ Providing suppliers with food and beverages during the event is a nice gesture – it really does make life a lot easier if you are dealing with happy workers.

#18 – Ask for feedback

Find out what guests enjoyed about the event and what they didn't, this way it will help you to organise an even better event next time.

- ❑ Put together a survey or a couple of quick questions about the event and circulate these around your guests afterwards so you can collect feedback. This could be done over email or using one of the many options for conducting private surveys online, such as SurveyMonkey.

Using this list should help you plan a successful event, feeling confident that your priorities are in place and that you have everything covered/. You could use this as a working document and checklist, crossing off tasks when completed, that way you can keep on top of everything and have a good idea of your progress as you go.

