

Beware the Christmas office party, warns city solicitor

WEST FIFE firms have been warned to prevent booze-fuelled staff Christmas party "shenanigans" getting out of hand – or face legal consequences.

Whether it's illicit broom-cupboard liaisons, photocopying posteriors or insulting the boss, every year unruly employees cause HR departments a headache in the New Year with behaviour that can lead to tribunals and sackings.

And one Dunfermline-based solicitor said there was also a risk to employers facing potential anti-social behaviour, personal injury or discrimination claims against them.

Donna Reynolds (29), a solicitor at CCW Business Lawyers, Carnegie Campus, said, "People have too much to drink, shenanigans or liaisons in cupboards do happen and there are even fights in the car park.

"Or the camera comes out at the party – the snaps start off fairly innocent but then maybe get a bit risqué and might get emailed round the office on Monday morning.

"If someone posts them on Facebook or another social network site then that can cause a bit of a problem."

With the Christmas party season kicking off, Ms Reynolds

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will today (Thursday) conduct a free workshop for worried West Fife firms on the mounting legal issues caused by 'high jinks' at parties and the various legislative changes that affect the outcomes.

It will also focus on conflict resolution and tackling topics including problems caused from the fall-out of the Christmas party.

"There has been a case where an employer made a promise to

an employee at a Christmas party after he had too much to drink," she added.

"He said he would give the worker a pay rise and was full of praise for him, telling him he was wonderful. But, thankfully for the employer, he wasn't bound by that.

"However, if he got really drunk and started praising the employee and then saying, for example, 'Do you know what? You're a bonnie lass,' he would very much get his knuckles rapped for that."

She continued, "One thing that never fails to surprise me is that bosses think if a group of work-

ers go out after the party without them then it's not their responsibility if there are any problems.

"But if you have a free bar for your employees that night and your employees leave all fired-up together after a social event in the workplace the employer could very well be responsible if something happens."

It is even thought that an employer could be held partly responsible if a staff member drove home drunk and had an accident if a free bar was provided in a venue not served by public transport or if public transport had stopped running for the night.

Other issues include not pro-

viding adequate refreshments for those who don't drink alcohol or eat meat due to personal and religious reasons or holding a party on a religious holiday which could contravene the 2003 Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations.

A survey of 3500 businesses by UK firm Peninsula Business Services Ltd in 2005 found that 89 per cent of employers had received a harassment complaint after a works party.

CCW's employment seminar takes place today (Thursday) at the firm's Dunfermline office at Crescent House, Carnegie Campus, from 12-2pm.