

Are we having fun yet? When celebrations at work become work

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Birthdays. Baby showers. Bon voyage. The reasons to celebrate are numerous but are they appropriate in today's office environment?

"Absolutely," says Lisa Mattam, Managing Principal of The Mattam Group, a management consulting firm in Toronto .

"It is natural to be connected to those you work with and therefore, celebrations (birthdays, showers, etc) are appropriate at work."

However, an office party is exactly that: an "office" party. That means although it is wrapped in a social context, its essence is still a business function.

"Ultimately, we must all remember that at work, our first priority is to work," says Mattam. "However, even your employer wants you to have fun with your colleagues and with your responsibilities."

Mattam suggests that the best way to achieve this balance is to ensure that in a fun environment: 1) your work is never compromised, 2) you limit the amount of time you spend socializing independent of your work and 3) you continue to be professional and respectful in the work environment.

In large companies and corporations, office celebrations may happen frequently.

And although they can be great team builders, they can also be time-consuming and too frequent. In these situations, Margaret Page, Founder and Director of Etiquette Page recommends smaller celebrations such as department by department or larger (and fewer) celebrations that recognize everybody in the organization.

" An occasional 15 minutes at the end of the day or added onto lunch can be a great way to recognize someone's achievement," she says.

Despite being a simple and inclusive office-culture activity, gathering around a piece of cake at an office celebration might not appeal to everyone. Sometimes an employee has other commitments such as family or other activities, and, sometimes they just don't like socializing at work. Employees might not be motivated to attend, but can also feel pressured to do so.

Companies and managers can strongly encourage participation in office celebrations, but sometimes, too much pressure to attend is applied. This builds resentment in reluctant employees rather than promoting an enjoyable, stress-free atmosphere,

"The important issue is - why are you not attending?" says Page. "What is not acceptable is to not attend because you want to shun the person," she says. "Don't play office politics. First rule of etiquette is to – Be Kind."

Mattam adds that although attendance at a work-related celebration is never mandatory, your colleagues and superiors may question your reason or motivation if you are absent.

"Your presence at these functions demonstrates your commitment and engagement to the organization and your pride in their success," she says. "For that reason, unless you can easily demonstrate a work priority that supersedes the function- you should attend."

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