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IT'S A PARTY, BUT BEHAVE

Offices throwing bigger holiday bashes

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As a contractor who works away from his employer's Farmington Hills headquarters, Mike Morelli looks forward to the JDM Systems' holiday party.

"I like the people I work for," said Morelli, 33, of Royal Oak. "I don't get to see them that often."

Though the company wouldn't call it a big splurge, JDM Systems human resources coordinator Julie May says this year's party is a step up from previous years.

The food will cost a little more. And employees are getting a \$20 coupon to get their fun started at Dave & Busters, an arcade on M-59 in Utica, she said.

Like JDM Systems, nearly one in three companies report they will boost party budgets this year, up from 23% of companies in 2005. The average increase in this year's budget is 16%.

As such spending increases, so does the chance that a partying employee may slip up and do something inappropriate. Too often, workers let loose and overindulge at company shindigs, experts say.

Robert Liss, a partner at the Liss & Shapero law firm in Berkley, warns that as companies spend more on parties, there are more opportunities for lawsuits.

Free-flowing alcohol is often the culprit, Liss said, causing employees to drink and drive or sexually harass colleagues. If employers opt to serve alcohol, they must take steps to ensure employee safety if they want to stay out of court.

According to Liss, a company

is liable for accidents that occur if an employee leaves a work function visibly intoxicated. The same goes for lewd behavior on the part of a visibly intoxicated employee.

"I would spend a couple of bucks getting people cabs, limos, whatever. I wouldn't let someone



"Free flowing alcohol is often the culprit."

—Robert Liss, Liss & Shapero

who could be intoxicated drive," Liss said.

Morelli of JDM Systems says alcohol has been a part of almost all company parties he has attended in the last 10 years at four different jobs. He's never thought of not drinking but limits his alcohol intake at work functions, as he does outside of work.

Intoxicated parties also can cause damage to their careers by saying things they wouldn't normally say while sober, experts say.

Employees should watch their behavior around bosses regardless of the setting, said John Challenger, chief executive officer of Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc., a Chicago-based consulting firm.

"It's the people who make a scene who get themselves in trou-

ble," he added. "Drinking can make you say something offensive or act in a way that gets you in trouble. You have to be cautious."

These are key things to remember, given that most employers are planning some kind of holiday shindig. Challenger, Gray & Christmas found that 79% of companies are planning a holiday party this year.

If anything, parties should be a morale-booster for the workforce, Challenger said. It's a way to get face time with higher-ups. It's also a way to build goodwill and network with colleagues.

"I do think that parties are a way of recognizing that there really is a community within the organization—that it's more than just people who sit next to each other and get the company's work out the door. Parties are a way to celebrate the year, the friendships. They're a way of creating, strengthening the ties."

Many employers consider it a faux pas when employees skip the company party.

"It's important to show up," Challenger said. "It says I'm a part of this group and it matters to me."

Morelli says he enjoys the laid-back nature of JDM's parties.

"The way I look at it is that it comes out of your own pocket if you have a really extravagant party," he said. "I like this because it's kind of in between."

And that is exactly what May, the human resources coordinator, says is the goal.

"We don't have holiday parties at halls. We try to do fun stuff—play laser tag, go to arcades," she said. "If people are going to leave early, it's not worth the cost."

Top 10 office party don'ts

■ Don't drink too much. Even if you think you can handle your alcohol, limit yourself to one drink.

■ Don't treat the office party like a singles bar. An office party gives you a chance to see another side of your coworkers.

■ Don't flirt or act in a sexually provocative manner.

■ Don't wear suggestive clothing. It is OK to wear more festive clothing (sparkles or sequins), but if you wouldn't wear it to the office, you shouldn't wear it to the office party.

■ Don't let your guard down. Relax at office parties, but don't reveal things about yourself that you might not want your coworkers to know.

■ Don't tell dirty or off-color jokes.

■ Don't use foul language. Although you may feel comfortable at the office party, be sure to keep bad language in check. It can make you look unprofessional.

■ Don't talk about people behind their backs.

■ Don't bring uninvited guests. Don't assume it's OK to bring your significant other or someone else without asking first.

■ Don't underestimate the importance of your guest's behavior. Be sure to invite someone who will behave appropriately.

Source: Dawn Rosenberg McKay, from www.about.com's Guide to Career Planning.

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