

## **Love it or hate it, it's office party time of year**

*Thu Dec 8, 2005 3:35 PM GMT*

By Ellen Wulforst

NEW YORK (Reuters) - It's office party time of year again, but the holiday shindigs just aren't what they used to be.

Gone are the nights of photocopying one's bare buttocks, groping interns and hauling home a gift bag full of goodies.

Instead, sensitised by sexual harassment cases, sobered by the dangers of drunk driving, solemn since September 11, 2001, saddened by Hurricane Katrina and set back by economic worries, companies are staging sedate affairs these days.

"In the mid-80's, when Wall Street was at its high, those parties were in their heyday," said Paul Siegel, an employment lawyer in Melville, New York. "It was a large frat party. Then it was all-out embarrassment the next day going back to work, having danced on the table wearing only a lampshade."

Indeed, a survey of Britons on a dating Web site showed two-thirds had kissed a colleague at a holiday office party and a third said they had sex with a boss at such a get-together.

Almost half reported having been so drunk they could not remember what they did.

Hoping to keep bad behaviour at bay, an office party these days might easily be held in an art gallery, perhaps during the day, with libations limited to beer and wine, experts say. Even the food has gotten healthier and the portions smaller.

"No one wants to appear to be overly lavish. They're concerned about how they would look," said Joan Steinberg, a partner in Match Catering and Eventstyles in New York.

"No one wants a party turned into a downer," she added. "They're just being conscientious."

### LEGAL LIABILITIES

Behind much of that conscience is the threat of legal liability, be it for employees driving home drunk or bosses harassing underlings, workplace experts say.

"It bleeds into a problem once the party's over and people go back to work. There's certainly a connection between these holiday parties and complaints in January and February," said [Randall Gold](#), a Madison, Wisconsin-area attorney, who expects a rise in sexual harassment complaints early in the new year.

Typical is a recent case in which Gold represented a woman at a small company whose owner made explicit sexual advances at the holiday party.

"Monday morning, the owner of the company came into her office and wanted to continue where he left off," he said. She settled a federal lawsuit out of court, he said.

Despite the pitfalls, the office party is like a seasonal ailment that can't be shaken. As many as nine out of 10 companies throw holiday parties, surveys show.

A study by executive search firm Battalia Winston International showed the number of companies throwing parties was down 8 percent from last year, the first drop since 2001.

"The higher interest rates and rising energy costs of recent months may be beginning to impact spending," said the company's chief executive, Dale Winston.

Battalia also found a third of companies surveyed said their parties are more modest than they were five years ago.

Chicago-based Challenger, Grey & Christmas Inc., an outplacement company, said its research found that roughly a fifth of companies holding office parties planned to spend more this year, but nearly as many planned to trim their party budgets.

"By dot.com-era standards, most of this year's holiday parties will be pretty tame affairs," said Chief Executive John Challenger. "Most employees do not want extravagant events. They just want the company to recognise and reward their efforts."

A recent survey of workers in Canada showed employees perhaps did not want to party at all. Just 19 percent of respondents found company bashes enjoyable and 81 percent found them a chore.

"One question I'm always asked is whether people have to go at all. People don't feel comfortable and they'd just as soon stay home," said Pamela Bedour, founder of The Protocol School of Ontario.

Her advice?

"Go. It's one of those things. You have to put yourself out and make an effort to go and an effort to mingle," she said.

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