

Pros & Cons of Business Socializing



When it comes to socializing with co-workers and managers, employees often find themselves with more questions than answers. Is socializing with professional peers and leaders a good thing? If so, how much socializing is expected and acceptable? What type of “socializing” is appropriate?

We have all heard tales of office romances that ended poorly, embarrassing employee behavior displayed at annual parties, office friendships that turned bitter after the promotion of one employee, and unprofessional activities taking place at professional conferences. We have all also heard stories of desirable assignments being awarded over a round of golf, and decisions being made during a smoke break. We have seen employees with shared hobbies and outside interests forge deep bonds and we have seen professional interactions turn into lifelong friendships and mentoring relationships. Indeed there are pros and cons of socializing in the workplace. Understanding and managing the difference can both benefit and protect us.

Some aspects of business socializing can be hard to navigate. One challenge is employer-organized activities, such as softball teams, bowling leagues, and community service projects. Employers offer these activities to bring employees of different levels together in the hopes of fostering a team dynamic and improving the way employees work together.

Although these activities are enjoyed by many employees, others are not so quick to get involved. After-hours socializing may not be possible or even desired by all employees, and other employees simply may not enjoy the type of activity offered. This results in some employees feeling pressured to participate in things they do not enjoy, and/or feeling guilty or jealous if they can't. To overcome this challenge, employees should be creative and identify roles they can play and still support the activity. For example, an employee who does not desire to play competitive softball may offer to serve



as the scorekeeper, timekeeper, or scheduler. If employees don't have time to participate in an after-hour volunteer project, perhaps they can coordinate something that takes place during the work schedule such as a canned food drive or blood drive. Consider business carpools or book clubs as other ways to interact less formally with colleagues.

Another challenge is office friendships. At first glance, they may remind people of cliques from high school. Yet research has shown that workplace friendships can have a positive effect on employees. Employees with friends on the job enjoy the work environment more, resulting in increased levels of engagement. Communication among employees improves, which increases productivity levels. And employees who operate in an atmosphere in which there is a high level of respect and encouragement increase their level of creativity and innovation. Friendships bring humanity into demanding work environments and offer employees safe places to vent minor stresses and receive constructive criticism.

However, workplace friendships can be detrimental to employees in some cases. Friendships can go awry when boundaries are crossed, confidences are breached, and lines of authority are blurred. Friendships can cause employees to overlook (or even enable) a colleague's bad behavior. Productivity can go down when employees spend an inordinate amount of time socializing and chatting about personal matters. Employee friendships can turn into exclusive groups and create competition and inequity within the work team. To avoid problems, determine if your employer has a policy regarding relationships between employees and, if so, follow it.

Perhaps the most common cause of issues with business socializing is the inability to differentiate between professional and personal relationships. Simply put, interacting with our professional peers or boss in any environment – formal or informal – is different than interacting with our relatives, friends, neighbors, and former classmates. We should not assume that because our manager clearly admires and praises our bowling skills, we will be on the top of his/her list for a promotion. Also, just because we regularly eat lunch with a colleague, we should not assume that he/she would be willing to give us a personal loan.



A wise way to build a professional reputation and personal integrity is to consistently use discretion, respect, and common sense when interacting with colleagues. Following are tips for successful business socializing:

- **Circulate among different people.** Use social business settings as opportunities to build relationships and increase your professional network. Stretch yourself beyond your comfort zone and take time to get to know colleagues that are both above and below you in authority. Get a reputation for being engaging to everyone.
- **Discuss things other than work.** In more social settings, employees should strive to get to know others on a different level. Do not limit your conversations to work topics. Avoid topics that could be controversial like religion and politics, but do take time to make small talk and show interest in another's family, interests, or hobbies.
- **Maintain confidences.** Do not betray another's trust by divulging things discussed in private. Do not share confidential information in an attempt to build alliances with others. Consider if there is a true "need to know" before disclosing information with someone who was not involved in the initial conversation.
- **Respect boundaries.** Do not take advantage of a personal relationship/friendship you have with a colleague and put him/her in an awkward position. Appreciate that a supervisor with whom you are friendly is still a supervisor and, as such, is expected to provide constructive criticism and directly address performance issues. Recognize that although you may be friendly with a peer, you do not have a right to ask how much of a raise he/she received.

- **Do not gossip.** Talking about others usually makes the people you are speaking to wonder what you say about them when they are not around! Introducing yourself as the office gossip often results in colleagues being cautious when interacting with you.



- **Mind your manners.** Remember that informal environments do not mean informal behavior. Do not use profanities in your language just because you are out of the workplace. Do not start referring to a colleague by his/her first name if you don't usually do so. Do not "pull rank" and order a lower-ranked colleague to retrieve something or assist you when in a social setting.

- **Use humor wisely.** Stay away from jokes that are off-color or make light of a particular group of people or ideology. Do not tell any joke that you wouldn't tell during a job interview.

- **Consume alcohol in moderation.** Appearing even slightly impaired or "out of character" can suggest that you are irresponsible and unprofessional. Do not assume that a business happy hour event or a stocked bar at an office party is clearance for you to become inebriated.

- **Respect personal space.** Do not start hugging employees just because you encounter them on a weekend and do not slap someone's rump just because you both are donning sports uniforms.

- **Control the green-eyed monster.** It is natural for employees to find co-workers with whom they can more easily relate and interact – you likely have some "favorites" yourself. Instead of feeling jealous or threatened by others' relationships, focus your attention on cultivating your own. The best way to get good colleagues is to **be** a good colleague.

Business socializing has its benefits. When done wisely, it can help our career, position us favorably among our peers and leaders, and enhance our relationships with others. But take a tip from the office bowling league ... when business socializing, knock them over with your engaging personality and be sure to stay out of the gutter!

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