

Non-drinkers devise strategies to navigate booze-centered work events

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Credit: Katarzyna Bienias, via freeimages.com

From holiday parties to happy hours, social events with co-workers and clients often revolve around alcohol, which can put non-drinkers in an awkward position: they don't want to drink, but they do want to take part in events they feel are important to networking and career advancement (without making drinkers feel bad). That perceived tension leads non-

drinkers to develop techniques to fit in socially without taking a drink.

"Drinking can be a big part of workplace culture, and being viewed as an outsider for any reason can hurt you professionally," says Lynsey Romo, a communication researcher at NC State who led a recent study on the issue.

"In our study, we interviewed successful professionals who don't drink," Romo says. "We found professionals felt that being a non-drinker was a form of deviance. Because they did not want to miss out on the career opportunities that come from networking and socializing, or because attending such functions was a job requirement, non-drinkers developed a variety of strategies to attend [social events](#) without making themselves, their co-workers, or their clients feel uncomfortable."

The researchers found that most non-drinkers didn't volunteer the fact that they were non-drinkers because they did not want to draw attention to themselves. And while some would answer honestly if asked, many declined a drink in ways that made their non-drinking ambiguous. For example, instead of saying "I don't drink," study participants often said things like "I'm not drinking tonight" or "I've got an early morning" to avoid having a drink.

In fact, some of the non-drinkers interviewed for the study would buy an [alcoholic drink](#) (but not drink it) in order to pass as a drinker and fit in with their colleagues. Non-drinkers did not want to be viewed as being judgmental or "holier-than-thou."

If it became clear that they weren't drinking, some non-drinkers found ways to show they didn't have a problem with drinking by buying a round of drinks for co-workers or volunteering to be a designated driver. Others used humor to defuse any social tension.

Other non-drinkers would use socially acceptable "excuses" for not drinking to avoid being seen as judgmental. Many of these excuses were health related. For example, one professional who didn't drink because he wanted to set a good example for his kids told co-workers that he didn't drink because he was trying to lose weight.

Similarly, another professional, who didn't drink because she was taking prescription drugs to deal with a mental-health issue, told co-workers that alcohol gave her migraines.

While non-drinkers used a variety of techniques to navigate these social situations, all of the techniques stem from the same perceived pressure to conform to social norms in the workplace. And that may be a problem.

"This work highlights a challenge facing many non-drinking adults," Romo adds. "It's something that organizations and HR departments may want to take into consideration. Historically, HR departments have been worried about problem drinkers, but they should also turn their attention to the needs of the non-drinkers in their ranks. HR departments should make sure non-alcoholic beverages are available at happy hours or host social activities that don't center on drinking.

"If employers want their employees to achieve their full potential, they need to foster an environment that encourages their employees to be themselves," Romo says.

More information: "An Examination of How Professionals Who Abstain From Alcohol Communicatively Negotiate Their Non-Drinking Identity," www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08982683.2014.982683#.VHTTPslAeQI

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