

- REPORT -

Q: CAN THE OFFICE PARTY BOOST YOUR CAREER?

A: With the right tactics in place, you can build lasting professional relationships over champagne and canapés

By FRANCES HEDGES



It's that time of year when the exhortation to 'eat, drink and be merry' can start to feel less like an invitation and more like a court order. Endless cocktail events fill your calendar; your usually organised office becomes a mess of make-up bags and spare pairs of heels; and healthy home-cooked suppers give way to a diet of canapés wolfed down surreptitiously between meet-and-greets. There's no doubt that it's exhausting – but at a professional level, it can also be incredibly rewarding. At Christmas, perhaps more than at any other time of year, people are more open to making new connections, which, when properly nurtured, can endure well beyond the festivities.

So, how do you turn a casual chat over mulled wine and mince pies into the foundations of a lasting business relationship? For the networking expert Julia Hobsbawm, the key is to arrive at the event with a mindset that is 'open to whatever fate throws at you', whether that means pitching a brilliant business idea to an investor or simply chatting with the waiter. Whichever you end up doing, give the person you are talking to your full attention, instead of constantly scanning the space for your prospects. 'All the neuroscience shows we've lied to ourselves about multi-tasking,' says Hobsbawm. 'The truth is, we are natural monotaskers, so the best thing to do is to make eye contact with one person and have a proper conversation.'

That might seem intimidating to anyone who is naturally timid, but holding your own at a party doesn't necessarily mean being the loudest or most outgoing person. 'The important thing is not to disappear into some sort of victim mentality – everyone is on a spectrum of introvert to extrovert, so there's no need to arrive wearing fake body armour,' advises Hobsbawm. A useful strategy is to identify the conversational style that works for you: for some, this will mean going straight in with a request for a business card, while others may prefer a softer, more oblique approach.

The designer and entrepreneur Lisa Tse falls into the latter camp, arguing that women forge stronger bonds when they are allowed to bring their whole selves to a work event. 'We're often told that it's unprofessional to talk about personal things, but why should we censor what's acceptable conversation?' she says. Tse founded the Sorority, a female-only members' club, to foster exactly this type of interaction. Offering an alternative to the competitive, male-dominated networking culture that prevails in many workplaces, it promises a 'mutually supportive environment in which women are free to be themselves, on their own terms'. Members are encouraged to talk as openly about their emotional wellbeing as they do about their careers because, says Tse, 'we understand each other's trials and tribulations in the way only other women can. It's a testament to how comfortable people feel that they volunteer private information when they come to our events – over the years we've heard about divorces, affairs and other great tragedies.' In effect, the club turns the traditional networking model on its head by putting relationships ahead of career goals, allowing professional opportunities to emerge organically from newly formed friendships.

Outside the safe confines of an all-female environment, however, a more bullish approach to building your network may be required. Tanuja Randery, a senior leader in the private-equity sector, believes that in a fiercely competitive environment, 'you need to play to win, not to fit in', which means using your knowledge and talents to

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stand out. Recalling her experience of working at a male-dominated data-storage company in the US, she says that her breakthrough came when she realised she didn't have to join in with her male colleagues' small talk in order to earn their respect. 'Rather than trying to chat about football, I'd start from a value-creation perspective,' she explains. 'In general, women haven't focused enough on using research and facts as a lever for building relationships – it's

less scary and an easier way to shine.'

Randery launched the Power Women Network – a cross-disciplinary group aimed at senior female leaders – in 2015 after noticing that many of her peers lacked confidence in a networking scenario. 'Perhaps they've felt uncomfortable being among men when they're drinking and cigar-smoking, or maybe they've simply been too busy caring for children or elderly relatives to devote much time to meeting new people,' she says. Her goal is not only to bring together like-minded women – many of whom have gone on to mentor or sponsor one another – but also to equip members with the ability to make the most of every networking opportunity, regardless of the context. Her advice is straightforward: always ask in advance about the format of an event; arrive promptly ('You shouldn't feel guilty about leaving work to attend – men never do'); and go in with a clear idea of the people you might like to meet. 'Don't feel concerned about interrupting conversations to speak with someone, but be honest and succinct about who you are and what you're interested in,' she recommends. 'Leave every encounter with a name or a confirmed follow-up meeting. Think about the way salespeople work – the best ones aren't necessarily focusing on closing a deal, they're looking at how to advance it every time.'

Most importantly, says Randery, the dialogue mustn't end at the party. 'If you make a connection, don't leave it there or let it drop,' she advises. 'A network is like a living creature – you have to maintain it and give back to it.' So, when party season finally draws to a close and the time comes to make your New Year's resolutions, remember: your network is for life – not just for Christmas. □