# Bulletin Board: Economy slumps can't bring down office celebrations

*by Amy_Winter*

Holiday cheer is in the air, especially for companies hosting parties to celebrate the season. Despite the housing slump and declining status of the economy, 90 percent of businesses are still planning a holiday party, an increase from 79 percent in 2006, according to a survey by Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc., a global outplacement agency that surveyed 100 human resource executives.

And almost 40 percent of these businesses have increased their party budget this year.

"Companies may be throwing caution to the wind in anticipation of a slowdown in 2008," says John A. Challenger, chief executive officer. "Or it may be that the troubles in the housing and financial sectors have remained relatively isolated and outside of home building and mortgage lending; there is good reason to celebrate."

Twelve percent of respondents plan to reduce their spending, but cuts average only 5 percent. Fifty percent of companies are budgeting the same amount of money as last year.

"We would need to see a catastrophic downturn in the economy to halt party spending entirely," says Challenger. "They have become part of the nationwide workplace culture."

Fewer companies will provide open bars at their parties this year. Only 46 percent of respondents say alcohol will be provided, compared to 60 percent last year. But 73 percent of employers are willing to spend extra money to have their parties at locations outside the office, and 69 percent will pay for a caterer or event planner.

Vault, a media company focused on careers, completed a survey asking 310 employees about past office holiday parties. Respondents said alcohol has been present at 75 percent of office gatherings, and 15 percent of these employees have witnessed inappropriate behavior from co-workers. In the romance department, 18 percent of respondents have seen co-worker hook-ups at parties.

Guests may not be as welcome to join in the celebrating this year. Sixty-five percent of employees can bring a guest, a decrease of 7 percent from last year. Some employees are fearful to attend the party. Seventeen percent would rather stay home than spend time outside of work with co-workers.

"The holiday party is filled with pitfalls, but it also offers great opportunities, such as socializing with

senior executives you might never interact with in the office," says Challenger. "Make an effort to break away from your comfort zone and introduce yourself to those who might help your career."

For more information, visit www.challenger.com and www.vault.com.

VOLUNTEER WORK PAYS OFF IN THE WORKPLACE

Involvement in service clubs, whether it is helping with a holiday party for children or raising funds for a benefit, produces professional skills that are useful in the working world. Women of the Moose, an organization devoted to providing care and bringing communities together, is a service club that provides many opportunities for women.

Janet Fregulia, the grand chancellor of the organization, feels she has gained more self-confidence and improved her decision-making skills by bringing women together as a team to run huge conventions. She compares her duties to a CEO of a corporation.

"I believe the club helped me progress upward in a construction company dominated by men," she says. "I had the confidence to improve jobs in the company."

Katy Marks, a one-year Moose member from Idaho, knows her recent involvement in the club has helped her gain the assurance to be less afraid when speaking in front of others, especially since she tends to be very shy.

"(The club) grooms them for opportunities to go into job interviews with more confidence," says Fregulia. "It gives them poise and the ability to speak without trembling."

Joyce Henderson, a seven-year Moose member from Arizona, feels the club has allowed her to refine her communication and networking skills. As a project consultant at Bank of America, she has learned more about bringing everyone together for one common goal when leading discussions.

Through community service, leadership, crafts or cooking events, service members develop people skills; they learn to grow as well as help others in the community.

For more information on this service club, visit www.mooseintl.org.

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