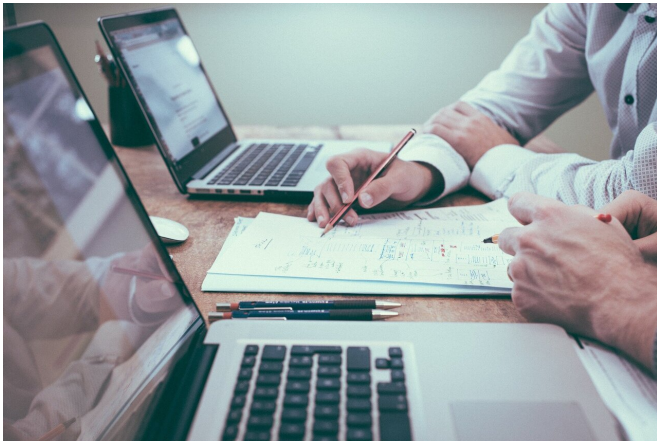


Sexual harassment may be reduced at fun work events, study finds

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The office holiday party loses its luster in light of new study findings from researchers at Penn State and Ohio State demonstrating that incidences of unwanted sexual attention are increased at these and other "fun" work events. This sexual harassment may be reduced, however, when these events are held during normal office hours, when attendance is optional and when employees are allowed to bring guests.

"Our research suggests that managers can take specific measures to help protect their employees from unwanted sexual attention at fun work events," said Michael J. Tews, associate professor of hospitality management, Penn State.

The team defined fun work events as those organized by employers and intended to bring enjoyment to employees.

Published in a recent issue of *Employee Relations*, the researchers gave online surveys to two groups of employees located throughout the United States—308 restaurant employees and 338 employees across different industries. They asked

the participants about their involvement in five types of fun activities—holiday parties and picnics, team building activities, competitions, public celebrations of work achievements and public recognition of personal milestones such as birthdays.

Survey respondents then ranked several statements on a five-point scale ranging from "never" to "almost daily," including, "Someone at work stared at you in a sexually inappropriate way," "Someone at work repeatedly asked you out, despite rejection" and "Someone at work touched you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable."

"We found that for both groups—the restaurant employees and all the other types of employees—unwanted sexual attention was significantly higher during fun activities than during normal work-related activities," said Phillip Jolly, assistant professor of hospitality management.

The researchers also included survey questions aimed at exploring the influence, if any, of mandatory participation, evening or weekend timing, presence of non-employees and alcohol use on the occurrence of [sexual harassment](#) at fun work events.

They found that sexual harassment was particularly high when participation in fun activities was mandatory and when the activities were held outside of normal work hours.

"It could be that some individuals perceive their autonomy as unfairly constrained when they are required to attend off-hours events," said Tews. "As a result, they may seek to remedy the situation through counterproductive work behavior, such as unwanted sexual attention."

In contrast, the team found that incidences of unwanted sexual attention were lower when fun activities included non-employees, such as friends and family.

"Friends and family may serve as buffers between targets and potential harassers," said Jolly.

Interestingly, the researchers did not find a significant impact of alcohol on unwanted sexual attention.

"We thought the presence of alcohol would be related to greater [unwanted sexual attention](#) because it can reduce inhibitions and blur the lines between appropriate and inappropriate workplace conduct, but we did not observe a relationship between the two," said Tews.

Tews said, "We hope that this research helps provide guidance to managers so that fun, which is intended to benefit employees, doesn't have the opposite effect."

More information: Michael J. Tews et al, The dark side? Fun in the workplace and unwanted sexual attention, *Employee Relations: The International Journal* (2019). [DOI: 10.1108/ER-06-2018-0165](#)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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