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Big Law for the New Economy

'Weinstein Effect' brings drastic drop in boozy office parties

By Megan Cerullo

The holiday office party in a post-Harvey Weinstein world is likely to look a lot tamer — if there's a get-together at all.

Mistletoe is out, spiking the punch is verboten and creating a safe space for workers is job one as 2017's flood of sexual harassment charges reverberates in board rooms and HR departments.

"We are seeing more companies take the extreme action of canceling their parties altogether," said Andrew Challenger, vice president of the outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, to the Daily News.

The numbers in his company's holiday party report back him up: 11% of businesses will not host a soiree this year after holding one in the past, a huge jump from just 4% in 2016.

Of the companies planning to celebrate with their employees, only 48% will serve alcohol — down from about 62% in 2016.

Blame it all on what Challenger calls the "Weinstein Effect."

The allegations of rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment against disgraced movie mogul Weinstein and an assortment of other prominent men proved a holiday party game-changer.

The open bar, once a party staple, is now a vestige of Christmas past at places like Vox — the general interest news site where editorial director Lockhart Steele was fired after an October harassment complaint.



Looking to avoid alcohol-fueled moments of ethically questionable behavior, businesses nationwide are ditching spirits in favor of a more conservative approach.

A leaked party memo states the company will "ramp up the food and cut down on the drinks." And instead of free booze all night, "each attendee will receive two drink tickets with which they can get alcoholic drinks if they choose."

Once the tickets are gone, only non-alcoholic drinks will be served. New York-based psychologist Dr. Sandra Haber thinks the new approach is a smart idea.

"Alcohol is like a courageous drug, but it can really operate against you because you can do or say inappropriate things," she warned.



Workers probably won't find themselves underneath any mistletoe at this year's office get-together. (Todor Tsvetkov/Getty Images)

Liquor is not the only thing disappearing from the party circuit. The National Federation of Independent Business, in its 2017 party guidelines, called for a farewell to mistletoe.

Some business are treating co-workers to team-building outings at venues like Escape the Room. (While a dark and mysterious escape room sounds like breeding ground for unwanted groping, the rooms are always monitored by a staff member.) Wyndham Manning, manager of Escape the Room's Midtown location, says holiday bookings are

up nearly 30% this year compared to last. "We have absolutely noticed an uptrend, which I think is reflective of people trying to get away from parties with alcohol," Manning told The News.

"I think people are bored of traditional holiday parties, but I certainly think it has to do with the current climate too."

Manning noted that J.P. Morgan and hedge funds are among the corporations that booked events there this season.

Kelly Culhane, an attorney in the Dallas office of Culhane Meadows, said cancelling the parties creates the possibility of co-workers blaming the victims of harassment. "When you do (cancel), you run the risk of creating backlash against the very class of people who were subject to harassment," she told The News.

New York-based psychiatrist Dr. Marlin Potash echoed her concerns about spiking the parties. According to Potash, the recent spate of charges against famous men like television hosts Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer, comedian Louis C.K. and film director Brett Ratner should put women more at ease.

"I think this could be the first time that holiday parties could be really fun because women feel like the tipping point has come and they can just say no to the creep who wants to pull them under the mistletoe," Potash told The News.

The Challenger, Gray & Christmas study also indicated that companies will shrink their guest lists this year. About 38% will invite spouses, partners and friends to their festivities, down from about 43% in 2016.

Sexual harassment lawyers and human resources professionals question that move, saying spousal invites are actually a good idea. "Inviting spouses and families is always a good idea because people are more likely to behave themselves if the people they have to go home with are present," said New York employment lawyer Brian Heller told The News.