

CHAT ROOM



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Do's and don'ts for annual office holiday parties

Parties, parties, parties! Studies show that this season is the "parties" time of the year. It's when friends and family enjoy a time of togetherness — sometimes after not seeing each other for months or even years — and share some of the joys and happiness of the season.

Whether you are the host or a guest at a party, the secrets of any successful gathering are good food, lively conversation, a congenial mixture of guests and a cordial and gracious host.

This is true whether you are entertaining in your home, at a restaurant, or at a rented hall. The scenario is a bit different, however, at an office party. Since the affair is for the whole company, you can't pick and choose whom to invite. Your food is limited to what the caterer can serve. Your duties as a host can vary because of the large number of people attending. Even though it is a social event, there is still an underlying business tone to the affair. You are still being judged by an office setting.

So whether you are hosting or attending a holiday party this year, here are some helpful hints along with some pitfalls to avoid at your office party:

■ Indicate on the invitations if spouses are invited, so there is no question about their attendance.

■ If the party is at a restaurant, the host should greet staff members at the door as they arrive. If the party is at the office, the host should circulate among employees, shaking hands and offering a personal word of thanks, along with wishes for a happy holiday.

■ Party-goers should be on their best behavior. Just because it is less restrictive than sitting at an office desk, that doesn't mean you should throw good manners out the window and let your hair down. Remember you have to face these same people Monday morning, so antics and acting foolish don't make points with anyone.

■ Arrive on time. This means within 15 minutes of the start time. Don't tell off-color or churlish or questionable jokes. Smoke only if it is allowed.

■ Even though a party usually means "dress up," at an office party clothing should be quite subdued. A suit with shirt and tie (even a wild one is acceptable here) or a sport jacket and pants with a turtle neck are appropriate for men. Women should stay away from anything that is too short or too tight or anything that is too provocative, such as showing cleavage or see-through clothing. An unusual piece of jewelry, a colorful scarf or an interesting pair of shoes added to a casual outfit is acceptable. This is not a time for employees to show off their racy and more daring clothes.

■ Do not use this time to corner your boss and ask for a raise or question why you didn't get that promotion or not as if you've been buddies since high school. Also don't badmouth or complain about co-workers or office policies. In fact, it is best to keep business conversation to a minimum if at all. This is a good time to get to know your co-workers' thoughts on other interesting issues and topics.

■ Many people use this holiday time as an excuse to drink too much, get drunk and have what they call "a good time." My first rule about drinking especially at an office party is DON'T. After a glass of wine or two, you may relax and become less cautious about what you say. You can undo your career in one night. You work hard at the office to present a positive image of yourself and inappropriate behavior at an office party will be remembered for a long time. If you must drink, sip it slowly and to absorb alcohol, nibble on some crackers or bread before and while you sip. Also limit yourself to only two drinks at the most and alternate with mineral water, fruit juices or soft drinks.

■ Do not get touchy-feely with others. This is another negative when

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OMNIBUS



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By mid-1997, Oliver Bosnjakovski wanted to get a college education to help advance his career in the information technology field.

But most of his time was already designated either for his job or family. When would there be time to devote to classes, let alone homework?

In the click of a computer mouse, Bosnjakovski's plight had a unique solution. That year, Schoolcraft College and Madonna University teamed up to launch OMNIBUS, the acronym for "Online Multi-degrees in National & International Business."

"Being able to get an education on the Internet was a plus," recalled Bosnjakovski, one of 14 students to complete the first four-year OMNIBUS cohort. "I was newly married at the time (in '97), working full-time and I just couldn't find the time to sit in classrooms at night knowing that it would take me several years just to earn an associate's degree."

With OMNIBUS, however, students who stick it out all the way through are rewarded with not one, not two but three shingles to hang on the wall.

"Most people think that since this program is offered on the Internet that it is easy," said Bosnjakovski, who graduated last spring with bachelor's and master's business degrees from Madonna after racking up an associate's from Schoolcraft. "It is far from it. It takes a special person to be able to learn in such an environment."

"You will get a quality education and you will work for it."

Sitting in a classroom is not required, and it's not even feasible for many OMNIBUS students, according to Jeanne Bonner, Schoolcraft's associate dean of distance learning.

"If they could be somewhere every Monday at 7 p.m., they probably would be sitting in a classroom," said Bonner, explaining why the educational niche is growing. "The fact is, they already know they can't. They've tried."

But OMNIBUS success stories do have to be supremely devoted to the state accredited program — and regularly communicate via Blackboard, Inc. education software with cohort mates and instructors.

Circles of cyberspace

Bonner is part of the team of educators who have been instrumental in the program's launch. Another is economics professor Dave Gregorich, known as "Prof Dave" among those who travel in OMNIBUS cyberspace circles.

What makes the program especially interesting, noted Gregorich, is that communication is done on-line, via e-mail.

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Talk about extremes in mother-daughter bonding.

For Barbara Buchanan and her daughter, Kaye Lynnette Bednark, it wasn't enough to chat on the telephone or meet for lunch. They had to go and earn their master's degrees together.

And they did. Both women, Canton Township residents, recently were among the first graduating class of the progressive OMNIBUS on-line program — a collaboration of Schoolcraft College and Madonna University. But it was a tough row to hoe: Out of 31 students beginning the inaugural session in fall 1997, just 14 stuck it out to earn bachelor's degrees; Buchanan and Bednark were among 12 to then attain the program's pinnacle.

"It was unbelievable to me how much I could actually learn in a short period of time," said Bednark of the program's heavy workload. "You really don't think that your mind can absorb as much as it does. But when you look back, you go, 'Wow, I did it.'"

For sanity's sake, they did it class by class, semester by semester, rather than looking at the entire four-year picture. "You can't look at time," Bednark said.



Family ties: Barbara Buchanan (left) and her daughter, Kaye Lynnette Bednark, both of Canton, strengthened their already-stout relationship by taking and completing the challenging OMNIBUS program together.

OMNIBUS requirements

For students beginning OMNIBUS in the 2001-02 school year, each year will be \$195 per credit hour for the length of their college experience. That amount includes fees, books and other course materials.

Degrees awarded include Associate of Arts, Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Master of Science in Business Administration.

Students must complete 156 credit hours over the four-year period. Each

year includes three 12-week terms and one four-week inter-session — with no classes in August and December.

As there is only one admission process, students who complete each phase automatically moves on to the next phase. That means students must earn associate degrees at Schoolcraft before transferring to Madonna for the bachelor's and master's degrees.

mail. It enables teacher-student bonds to be established, through written words that can be pounded out on a computer keyboard 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Because of that, communication can be more personal, informal and effective than in the traditional lecture hall environment.

"There's no body language, no facial expression," he explained. "You really have to understand how to communicate. It's text-to-text. It's professional professor to professional student."

With the electronic back-and-forth dialogue of questions, comments and delivery, OMNIBUS requires extra care to how the e-mails are crafted.

"The printed word is monotone, and sometimes you have to make it 'stereo,' phonetic surround sound," Gregorich said. "When you break through from monotone to surround sound, you're amazed at the increased quality of conversation."

Concurring was Bosnjakovski, a former Livonia resident.

"I actually thought communication was much easier and more open than in a traditional classroom," Bosnjakovski said. "We actually had more time to think about what was being taught. Sometimes in a classroom environment you only get a few students actually participating in discussions. In OMNIBUS, everyone participated."

Temptation

In the mid-1990s, the concept of "distance learning" began being looked at among top officials at Madonna and Schoolcraft as a way to help older students fit in studies amongst family and job responsibilities.

Madonna's business dean, Stuart Arends, and Schoolcraft's Conway Jeffress — then vice president for instruction — led discussions and examined what little existed at the time in the realm of Internet learning.

Jeffress, who has since become Schoolcraft's president, recently said the concept of a technology-based program in which students would pay one tuition price all the way through was a temptation worth pursuing.

Just as compelling was helping lead a groundbreaking partnership between a four-year private college and two-year public one.

"It would provide an opportunity for students to go from an associate's to master's degree in a relatively short period of time," Jeffress said. "It was too tempting for me to ignore. It had everything we wanted to do all embodied in one program. We wanted to do something dramatic for folks."

Although Arends could not be reached for comment, Schoolcraft's Bonner said he is solidly behind the program to the point that he makes national presentations about OMNIBUS.

"We have yet to see this kind of partnership elsewhere in the nation," Bonner said. "It's a jewel of a program. We designed this from those early conversations and early research."

Jeffress underscored that potential is in place for OMNIBUS student to actively participate anywhere he or she can access a computer — even Guam. "The thing that's so great about this type of learning is it is not location based."

Good anywhere

The Schoolcraft president also stressed that OMNIBUS requires diligence and dedication, as well as the ability to manage time and juggle

Mom, daughter ride OMNIBUS to college success

Students enroll into first-year business courses at either Livonia institution and stick with the same group of instructors and students in what is called a cohort — until they drop out or earn up to three degrees after a little more than four years. Buchanan and Bednark, for example, were among those starting at Schoolcraft and earning associate's degrees before moving over to Madonna for the rest of the program.

They figured this was their window of opportunity for bachelor of science business administration (BSBA) or master of science business administration (MSBA) degrees, so why not make the most of it? Not everybody took that approach, however.

"When we got our bachelor's degrees, we only needed six months to get out master's degree," said Buchanan, who returned to school after raising her family. "Several classmates dropped out after getting their bachelor's, though. They were too stressed out."

Support system

In order to deal with that stress — understandable given the difficult course, at-home distractions and condensing of 16-week courses into 12 weeks — a reliable support system is essential. That was already built in as far as Buchanan and Bednark were

concerned.

"We've always had a great relationship," said Bednark, sitting next to her agreeing mom at a Canton restaurant, where they talked about the experience.

Keys to the whole experience, they agreed, include making personal sacrifices ("My granddaughter said, 'I'll be glad to have my Grandma back,'" said Buchanan), putting in the time on a daily basis, and developing relationships with others in the cohort.

Of course, it didn't hurt that they already had each other to lean on. "I think it strengthened our relationship because we were together more and when we were together, that's what we talked about, school or the assignments," said Bednark, who, like her mom, earned a 3.8 grade-point-degree while achieving their degrees from Madonna. They went through commencement exercises in May but actually didn't complete the demanding OMNIBUS program until July.

"But if one was in this program and the other was not, there'd be no time for chit-chat about other things," said Bednark, a 1988 graduate of Plymouth Salem High School. "I tell people when they join to find someone, meet somebody, take down their phone number so they don't feel so alone."

Since signing up for the fall 1997

semester, beginning course work at Schoolcraft, they formed strong bonds with classmates such as Sue Hager of Canton, Northville police dispatcher Michelle Kendall, Garden City's Dawn Rodgers and Renee Schultz of Livonia.

Gaining trust

It also meant plenty to feel comfortable communicating — whether in person, over the telephone or Internet — with OMNIBUS program faculty and staff.

They pointed to their connection with program coordinator Eugene Dainidis and professors Dave Gregorich, Mark Harris and Jeanne Bonner. Bonner also is Schoolcraft's associate dean for liberal arts, independent and distance learning.

"That is the core of this program," Buchanan said of teacher-student communication. "With any on-line class, communication is so important. And, (it's) the tone of that communication."

Because the bulk of information swapping takes place via e-mail and through the Blackboard, Inc. education software program, someone's actual intention can be misconstrued if a message is poorly written. Without face-to-face time, it is harder for professors and students to gain each other's trust, let alone the trust of classmates, who