

## Office party; not a time to cut loose

BEHAVIOUR | Avoid low-cut tops, too much alcohol, and a temptation to get just a little too jolly with the boss

**Gillian Shaw**  
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CREDIT: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun

DO: Image consultant Denisa Nica demonstrates a good wardrobe option for the office party. Not too much skin but enough glam to signify it's a special occasion.

Rudolph with your nose so bright, you're way over the legal limit to lead the sleigh tonight and by the way -- don't bother showing up Monday because you've just killed your career at the office Christmas party.

"The saying is, not a lot of people make their careers at the Christmas party but a lot of people break their careers at the Christmas party," cautions image consultant Denisa Nica, who coaches clients on everything from business etiquette to the cut of their suits. "You probably won't get promoted based on the way you behave at the Christmas party but you could put an end to promotions. You have to remember, it's a business event first, a party second."

For a season where you're supposed to be jolly, getting through the Christmas office party can be a veritable minefield.

Your first mistake could come before you leave home -- woe to the fashion illiterate who dons the wrong apparel. That's before you even get a drink in your hand and take on the small talk. And don't think drowning your anxieties by repeated trips to the bar will help. If there's anyone worse than a tongue-tied bore, it's the loquacious bore breathing alcoholic fumes over all who can't escape fast enough.

In today's Working, Nica offers her list of do' and don'ts for surviving -- and thriving -- at the office Christmas party.

Don't:

- Overdress or underdress. Designations as ambiguous as "dressy casual or cocktail attire" confuse many people. You wear jeans, everyone else wears silk. You wear a gown, others wear a business suit.

- Wear jeans unless your office culture is such that your boss would collapse in a dead faint at the sight of employees wearing anything but denim; ditto for sneakers; ski-type sweaters stay at the hill; baggy pants and ones so low they risk a wardrobe slip; sweatshirts; and do something about the hat hair because you need to ditch the hat.

- Show up in tight clothes, or a sleeveless top without a jacket; cleavage-baring deep-cut blouses, see-through tops -- less is more when it comes to showing off skin at the Christmas party; hats of any kind, too-short skirts, flip-floppy plastic shoes.

The rule of the thumb is, if you wear the shoes and the clothes when you walk the dog, or when shopping for groceries, it's probably not a good idea to wear them at a party.

- Over-accessorize -- many women feel the urge to wear that beautiful chunky necklace with matching earrings. The result? Too much competing detail around the face, that takes away from the entire look.

- Drink too much. It can destroy your image and with it that promotion you were hoping for.

- Tell rude jokes. Ask yourself whether the humour is appropriate, tasteful and timely. If it doesn't feel right, than it's not right.

- Be overly effervescent. Christmas parties are the same as entertaining a client. Your behaviour has to reflect that it's business first and a party second.

Do:

- Consider the type of event it is when you reach into your closet for the perfect attire; remember why you are attending the event and what you are trying to accomplish. Some simple common sense could save you from the worst of the fashion faux pas.

- Wear, for men, a suit with a collared shirt and tie (one option); dress slacks and sport coat with shirt and tie (another); and for the formal event, a tuxedo or a suit that's a step up from the one you sweated the day through at the office.

- Wear, for women, suits, dresses, skirts with dressy sweaters or blouses; a matching suit or blazer with slacks; the perfect little black dress that can go from a cocktail party to a semi-formal event; dress shoes and bag; dress boots only with a long skirt that covers the top of the boot; metallic shoes and evening bag with that black dress.

- Read body language. If someone is backing off when you touch them, don't wait for another hint. This is probably not the time to try and convince your boss of the value of the group hug.

- Have people respect your personal space. If they are too close, take a step back, and move your torso slightly to the side to send the message.

- For employers, to set the tone. Exhibit exactly the same behaviour that they expect from their employees.

- Make a great impression by making eye contact, having a firm grip when you shake hands, displaying open gestures instead of closed gestures, walking confidently and graciously into a room.

- Become a small-talk survivor. Don't rush through conversations. Ask questions, and be a careful listener. Be respectful of the opinions of others, and avoid interrogating your conversation partner. You are there to mingle, so don't spend all evening talking with the same person. Have exit lines prepared.

- Be prepared for pauses in the conversation. Try these icebreakers: "Tell me about your plans for this holiday season."

"How does the holiday season impact your work/industry?"

"What is your favourite thing about the holiday season and why?"

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gshaw@png.canwest.com

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