

Raise a glass to lust and liquor at work

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Last night, I did what I always do when I'm feeling jaded. I got out my boxed set of *Mad Men* and immersed myself in the hedonistic, glamorous world of Madison Avenue in the 1960s, when all women were a 38 DDD cup, all men drank scotch from lunchtime until bedtime, everyone chain-smoked and fornicated whenever they got the chance.

The show is delightful because of its contrast to the dreariness of modern, strait-laced office life. In the past 10 days, two things have happened that make me think the laces are now pulled too tight; so tight, in fact, that they are cutting off the oxygen to people's heads.

The first was the sex scandal that resulted in the [resignation of Mark Hurd](#) as chief executive of [Hewlett-Packard](#). As sex scandals go, this one was scandalously unsexy. Indeed, according to news reports, there was no sex in it at all. There was no harassment, no hanky or panky, yet the "close personal relationship" between Mr Hurd and a female consultant nevertheless breached the company's rules and action therefore needed to be taken.

"Zero tolerance" read the headline in the Financial Times a week ago. But zero tolerance of what? I have read the news stories and press releases and the only damning thing I could find was that Mr Hurd and the woman had some dinners together that were put on expenses. This was judged grave enough to cause Mr Hurd to beat himself with the birch rod, saying: "I did not live up to the standards and principles of trust, respect and integrity that I have espoused at HP."

But what standards were these? And how didn't he live up to them?

The HR board was congratulated for acting decisively in ousting the formerly heroic CEO. It may have been decisive but the decision was a feeble one. It decided that it would be better to lose a good CEO than to admit that he was a slightly flawed human being. The price was heavy: shareholders lost \$10bn overnight in the value of their shares, while the disgraced Mr Hurd left the company with a fat pay-out for his pains.

The most puzzling detail about it all is that the meals appear to have cost \$20,000. The only explanation I can think of for such a big bill is that perhaps Mr Hurd and the woman comforted themselves for being unable to commit adultery by committing gluttony instead.

While the modern, Hewlett-Packard-style sex scandal is long on scandal and short on sex, in *Mad Men* things are the other way round: heavy on sex, light on scandal. This seems healthier all round, particularly as far as shareholders are concerned.

At Sterling Cooper, the fictional ad agency, the fornication is messy and people get hurt and babies get conceived out of wedlock. There is a human cost but the agency itself escapes unscathed and the business of writing and selling ads goes on unaffected. There is a delightful simplicity and innocence to all this. Employees work, behave badly and then work some more.

They also do something else at Sterling Cooper that no one does 40 years on in America: drink.

The second thing that happened last week shows just how extreme the anti-booze fanaticism has become. At the [Academy of Management in Montreal](#), a paper was presented proving that simply holding a glass of wine can damage your career. In the most dismal experiment ever carried out, 610 managers were asked to watch candidates being interviewed over dinner. The interviewer ordered wine; some candidates followed suit while others chose soda. Even though the candidates did not raise the glass to their lips, those with wine in front of them were judged less intelligent than those staring at a glass of Fanta.

Watching Don Draper in *Mad Men* raise something far stronger than wine to his lips doesn't make me doubt his intelligence; it makes me long for those heavy drinking days. This nostalgia is only slightly dented by my memory of what life was actually like in the 1980s on Fleet Street when journalists sloped off to the pub every lunch time. Unless my memory is playing tricks, the men then did not look like Don Draper. They had giant pot bellies, and they sometimes slurred their words in the afternoons.

In the world of *Mad Men*, judgment was warped by lust and alcohol. But in the puritanical, modern business world, judgment is warped by something more pernicious: fear of lust and fear of alcohol. Both worlds were bad, but the first surely had the edge on the second: at least it was intermittently enjoyable.

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