

The  
Economist

## Drinking at work

# The boredom of boozeless business

## The sad demise of the three-Martini lunch

Aug 11th 2012 | from the print edition

AMERICA has a proud history of drinking on the job. Craftsmen who built the first government buildings in the 17th century were sometimes paid in brandy. The 19th-century railroaders who laid the foundations of modern America were notoriously thirsty. And anyone who thinks that “Mad Men”, a TV drama in which 1960s advertising executives spend the working day sucking up Scotch, is a pastiche, would do well to talk to an account manager from the time—though his memory may be hazy.

America also has a long tradition of temperance. From the Washingtonian movement to Prohibition, there have been many attempts to sober up the workforce. Today, it seems that the battle is over and the killjoys have won.

A glass of something fizzy over lunch with an American executive now means sparkling water. The three-Martini lunch fell into decline in the 1970s, the victim of sober economic times that demanded clear-headed



Another busy day at the office

executives, and also of political pressure: Jimmy Carter made it an issue in the 1976 presidential campaign. Morgan Stanley's New York bankers, for example, were instructed to avoid the drinks cabinet except when entertaining European clients (who could hardly be expected to make it through the day without a snifter). Many modern contracts expressly forbid the consumption of alcohol. Even famously booze-fuelled occupations such as journalism have felt the puritanical wind: hacks at *Bloomberg Businessweek* can be disciplined for so much as sipping a spritzer.

America's ascetic reputation is confirmed by a paper to be published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* by Scott Rick of the University of Michigan and Maurice Schweitzer of Wharton Business School. They looked at Americans' perception of drinking in a professional setting. In one experiment, they found that job candidates who ordered a glass of wine during an interview over dinner were viewed as less intelligent than those who ordered a soft drink. This holds true even when the interviewer himself is enjoying something a little stronger. Several other experiments showed that Americans link even moderate drinking with stupidity, which the professors call the "imbibing idiot bias".

This may be short-sighted. Another recent paper from the journal *Consciousness and Cognition* by psychologists at the University of Illinois confirms what many have long suspected: a couple of drinks makes workers more creative. Tipsy employees, they say, find it hard to focus on a task, but this makes them more likely to come up with innovative ideas. This may help to explain the success of Silicon Valley, one of the last workplaces in America where hard and soft drinks still jostle for space in the company fridge.

from the print edition | Business

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2012. All rights reserved.