

Happy Hour

THE END OF THE PANDEMIC HAS COLLEAGUES back to sitting together, and on occasion drinking together. The value of that, we're sure, goes beyond research showing a creativity boost among colleagues sharing a beer.

There's also the value of making new acquaintances. "Building your contacts is quite hard to do in the office," says Dan Roberts, a Brunswick Partner with 25 years of experience as a journalist and manager in newsrooms. "There are industries where you are expected to take people out for lunch or meet for a drink after work, and where doing so helps build your network."

"Millions of people across the planet enjoy alcohol as a natural part of celebrating and socializing," says Nick Howard, a Brunswick Partner who leads the firm's Employee Engagement offer in Europe. "What we're focusing on today is the separate issue of irresponsible alcohol use and, narrower yet, irresponsible alcohol use among people who work together."

The *Brunswick Review* moderated an informal conversation between Howard and Roberts, along with Catherine Roberts, a Director in the firm's global Litigation offer, and Isabel Davies, an associate in the firm's Employee Engagement offering. All are based in London and part of a global team who help clients tackle the reputational impacts of workplace misconduct, sometimes resulting from alcohol use.

Are there fewer drinks being consumed at the office these days?

DAN ROBERTS: In our professional lifetimes, there's been a shift away from drinking on the premises.

When I first joined newspapers, there was a bar slightly above the newsroom. All the copy editors used to come in for their shift an hour or two early to drink the subsidized beer, then write headlines and edit copy, which, after a certain number of pints, is no longer a reliable system. At another newspaper, there was a drinks trolley that would go around most Fridays, and people would drink champagne at 3 or 4 in the afternoon with a paper going out that night.

Those days have changed. They've changed because people are not spending that kind of money. They're also recognizing that it's not very healthy, and not conducive to the job they're meant to be doing.

Yet if the actual in-office drinking has nearly gone away, the issue now is the gray area, after-office and semi-social events.

NICK HOWARD: It is definitely less normal for alcohol to be consumed in the office now. But it's also true that some offices still operate a bar for employees, and on certain days the first few drinks are free.

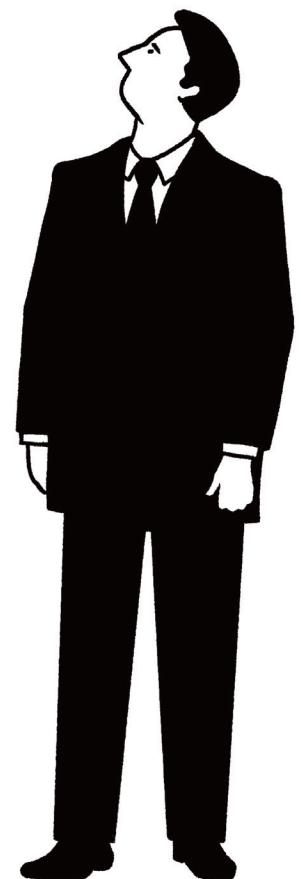
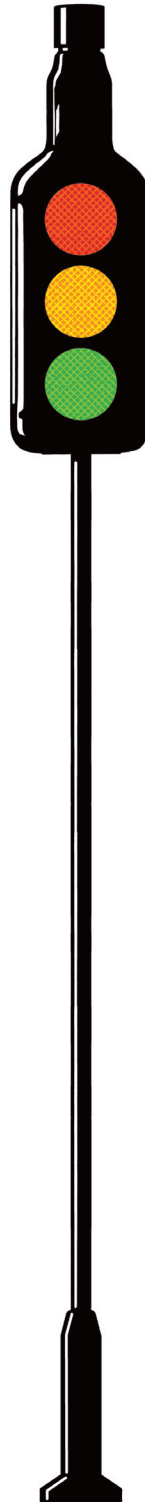
A panel of **BRUNSWICK EXPERTS** discusses the rewards and risks of drinking with colleagues.

The idea behind it is there's a sort of team spirit, where you get to the end of day, you're working hard, everybody goes to the bar, grabs a couple of beers, has a chat, goes back to their desks and carries on. It's a way of bonding, a nice treat for those working late.

ISABEL DAVIES: Of course, employers must ban alcohol from environments where it might compromise safety. For example, I've been a consultant in the rail industry, and there safety is paramount. On the topic of alcohol there is no blurred line. You get on company time, on company premises, no alcohol.

NICK HOWARD: I once worked with a US manufacturing company that fired someone because they had a crate of beer for a weekend barbecue unopened in their car in the company car park.

CATHERINE ROBERTS: As a former lawyer, I tend



to think about this as a risk management issue. To a company, the question I would ask is: What's your risk tolerance? My take is that most corporate environments are still operating at about a six, or higher, out of 10—10 constituting a serious risk, along the lines of a boozy Christmas party on a boat on the Thames, and one or zero reflecting no alcohol at all associated with the workplace. Weighing against that risk today is the desire to get people back to the office.

ISABEL DAVIES: Exactly. The desire to get people back to the office, to get young people in particular mixing and collaborating, versus the risk of alcohol becoming a catalyst for misbehavior.

NICK HOWARD: We've seen businesses try having it both ways. One offered drinks at a staff party—but rationed them with tokens. You got three drinks tokens and after that, no more alcohol.

Our argument would be if you feel the need to ration alcohol, the problem may be rooted in the underlying culture.

CATHERINE ROBERTS: The tokens suggest, "You're not mature enough to deal with alcohol. We're going to treat you like children."

NICK HOWARD: What about going to the pub after work? That's a big thing in the UK, particularly in the summer. Walk around London after 5 on a sunny Thursday afternoon and people are standing outside pubs. As a leader, how do you manage groups of employees having a drink? I don't think you could tell them not to. Yet concerns about what's called "workplace conduct" can extend outside the workplace.

CATHERINE ROBERTS: If a senior person harassed a junior colleague in that situation, it could be very tricky for a company to argue that it bears no responsibility. The junior colleague would argue that the employer set up the relationship, the dynamic, the workplace culture.

Ultimately, no corporation or business can manage every single thing that an employee *might* do at an event held in the name of the company, or an impromptu after-party. It's about sharing and inculcating employees with your company values, and really having a collective agreement about what's acceptable within your specific culture. That's the only way you get to the heart of these issues.

DAN ROBERTS: Tolerance of misconduct is much lower than it has been historically. And the speed with which a misconduct scandal can become a license-to-operate scandal really makes alcohol at company functions an existential risk for organizations.

I suspect employers are increasingly going to take the risk-free alternative of saying, "Not only are we not going to allow alcohol at the post-work events,

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we're not even going to have post-work events." I think that might be the world where we're heading. It would be a sad state of affairs to get there, and it will carry other unintended consequences, but I do worry that that's where we're heading fast.

If you're a risk committee of a large organization that says, "Christmas party, probably going to be fine. But if it goes wrong, we're in huge trouble," you've got to really want that Christmas party to go ahead.

ISABEL DAVIES: And it's hard to track the benefits of a Christmas party socially.

NICK HOWARD: But if businesses cancel all social events, there's a risk that employees, colleagues, teammates become disconnected, especially after COVID, remote working, people not coming back together.

Is this another nail in the coffin of the office environment? Is it really what we want? No more enjoying each other's company, getting to know each other, having a sense of team spirit. No more, "Everybody's had a really tough year, we're going to have a terrific Christmas party. We're going to celebrate everything we've done." Might bans on alcohol deepen the larger problem of disconnection?

If young people are known to drink less than previous generations, and if it's young people who are longing to bond after work with colleagues, why not disinvite the older generations?

NICK HOWARD: There was a time when I was included in conversations about going to the pub after work. But nowadays, nobody asks me! "Nick's old. He's got kids. He's not going to want to come."

A senior person might think it best to go to the pub just long enough to show team spirit, then leave and let the younger folk enjoy themselves. Alternatively, a senior person might feel obligated to stick around, stay sober and make sure nothing bad happens.

If a leader suggests doing something after work, does a junior person feel obligated?

ISABEL DAVIES: If the drinks are suggested by the senior leader, you'd want to look like a team player for going along. I've definitely worked in teams where the drinks are always driven by the senior male lead. And it might be more social rather than the team collaboration, but absolutely, I think juniors feel they need to go along. I think it would take a very strong personality to turn those down.

NICK HOWARD: Would you feel the need to have an alcoholic drink?

ISABEL DAVIES: Yeah, I think so. But that's shifting. Gen Z is much better at accepting different ways of drinking. ♦