

(U) Ask Zelda!: Navigating the Social Scene with Wallet and Dignity Intact

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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Dear Zelda,

(U) My office tends to host visitors from time to time and as a result, coordinates after-hours dinners to build & strengthen relationships with such visitors. It's a good practice, but the downside is that, being the only one in the office who is seemingly on a budget, most events have been at places I just can't afford right now or are, IMHO, inappropriate. As a result, I almost always respectfully decline each time. I've tried to suggest picking more reasonable places, but I get outvoted, and most recently have heard "Well you never go anyway, so why do you care?" from coworkers.

(U) I don't like the fact that I'm projecting a non-team-player feel. My question is, should I just suck-it-up and start budgeting for potential luncheon/dinner events? If not, how bad does it really look when there are office get-togethers and everyone seems to attend but one person?

-- Purse Minder, not Anti-social

Dear Purse Minder,

What a great question! This is one of those sticky, semi-official areas that there aren't any rules for. I'm glad *someone* in your office is worried about possibly offending your visitor...it sounds like a few of your co-workers could use some sensitivity training.

The next visitor who comes through, how about if YOU volunteer to organize the after-hours dinner? Pick one of the places you have researched that is appropriate, affordable and nice (not fast food), and then be sure to attend. Show your office that you're a team player. Alternatively, you could go to some of the pricier restaurants with them, but order a less-expensive item -- for example, an appetizer or side salad. (Just be sure to eat a hefty snack before leaving for the restaurant!) That way you can participate in the social event and you won't bust your budget.

I encourage you to be honest with your co-workers. There is no shame in being on a budget. It doesn't mean you're poor (not that there's anything shameful about that, either), just that you plan ahead for how to spend your money. You should not have to "suck it up" if that's not how you choose to spend your paycheck. When they complain that "you never go anyway," that's a great opener to tell them you would attend if it were somewhere more affordable. You don't have to sound like a prude if they pick one of those "inappropriate" places, just point out that your visitors might feel uncomfortable there but not want to offend their hosts by nixing the offer.

Other, Similar Situations

Nowadays so many people are on special diets (vegetarian, gluten-free, Weight Watchers), and this advice works equally well for them. If you are limited in what you can eat, causing you to avoid office social occasions, research the local restaurant menus to see which have gluten-free/low-cal/vegetarian options. Then suggest one or several of these restaurants the next time a group from work is organizing a farewell luncheon or morale build. Volunteer to help plan the event so you can have more input. Knowing what you can order in advance -- and that there is something you can eat -- will give you the confidence to relax and enjoy the company.

I'm glad to hear that you want to participate in these after-hours activities. Socializing and team

building are more than just fun extras; they can help colleagues work better together and ultimately contribute to mission success. While no one should be forced to attend a social event they don't want to, it's usually easy enough to accommodate those with special needs.

Zelda

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(U) Looking for some of the older "Ask Zelda" columns? They are filed away in the archives under the "Ask Zelda! 2010" and "Ask Zelda! 2011" and "Ask Zelda! 2012" and "Ask Zelda! 2013" series. Also, if you'd like to submit a question of your own to Zelda, just use the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below to send it in.

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