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The Workplace: Bonding beyond guy stuff

By Lisa Belkin The New York Times
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NEW YORK Years ago, when Deborah Coleman was the most senior female executive at Apple Computer, she attended a company retreat. Knowing that she would be the only woman in the room, and certain that all the small talk would be about sports, she spent a night cramming about Northern California sports teams.

She sat down at dinner, all prepped to talk about the Giants and the 49ers, when someone complimented the Apple chief executive, John Sculley, on his sweater. He stood up, turned to model it and spent much of the meal discussing the marvelous selection at Nordstrom.

"So much for sports," said Coleman, who is a founder and general partner of SmartForest Ventures, a venture capital firm based in Portland, Oregon. "I should have brushed up on fashion."

I thought of Coleman this summer when I was invited to go golfing. It was a women's networking event, a chance for female clients of a certain industry to bond on the links.

The invitation was worded as a jab at the way men have been doing business for years, but it struck me as a step backward. One of the many advances women have brought to the workplace is the right not to bond over golf (or any of the other sports that I have been, um, pathetic at since childhood) because there are so many more interesting things to do.

Don't get me wrong; I am all in favor of bonding. Relationships are what make the office palatable, what give it depth and flavor, what make you want to show up every day. A Gallup survey has found that employees are much more likely to stay in a job if they have a "best friend" at work. That has probably been true for eons, but until recently most of the available friends had been male.

"Sports became a bonding glue when the old boys' network ruled," said April Masini, who writes about dating and relationships for her online magazine, AskApril.com. Now, she said, "There are lots of other networks, like the Pink Network, which is women; the Rainbow Network, which is gays; and the Puke-Stained Network, which is working mothers." And these groups are coming up with a variety of ways to play.

Diane Danielson, a former vice president of a real estate firm and the founder of a women's networking group, downtownwomensclub.com, likes to offer clients and colleagues tickets to events that do not involve sports. Theater, for instance. "I generally try to get three tickets and invite two clients who might enjoy meeting each other," she said. "It makes it a fun night out" and eliminates one potential risk in any invitation: "entertaining male clients who may think you're asking them out on a date."

The law firm of Winston & Strawn issues invitations to events planned just for female clients and partners. There was an evening of sushi-rolling a while back. Last month, there was a private viewing of the Chanel exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Other companies bring employees together to create things. Nevada Association Services, a collections agency for homeowners' associations, has held a glass-blowing event for employees and clients. At Regence Group, a health insurer, one division recently held a two-day retreat that included painting clay vases, bowls and mugs, then firing them in a kiln.

Among the most laudable bonding experiences are those that make the world better. The 27 employees of RxHub, a health information technology company in St. Paul, Minnesota, recently spent a day building a Habitat for Humanity house together.

Four times a year, Alta Public Relations in San Francisco invites employees, current and prospective clients and their families to volunteer together at a local food bank. The three hours are physically taxing, said Erica Lorraine Scheidt, a principal in the firm, but "we sweat, have fun together and lose the 'us versus them' that is common in a client-agency relationship."

Even more fun is had, I imagine, at companies where bonding includes travel. Brogan & Partners, an advertising agency

with offices in Michigan and North Carolina, takes an annual company "mystery trip."

All 50 employees are told only what to pack and the average temperature where they are going. Not until they arrive at the airport is their destination revealed. This year they went to Amsterdam. Last year it was Iceland. Other trips have been to London, San Francisco and the Bahamas.

In the Bahamas, tee times were available, but only for those who like that sort of thing.

Thomas Fuller will return next week.

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