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## BUSINESS

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### Taking Aim at Team Building

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When it comes to blurring the lines between work and play, there's nothing quite like corporate celebrations.

However, if you think a 'social hour' with a flute of Champagne and ginger bread cookies for New Year's is enough to mark the holiday in the company of fellow employees, think twice! Russian employees expect their parties lavish, their holiday season long, and their glasses ... steamed up from the excitement.



"I think we spend about four times more per person on corporate events here than we would in the States," said James Beatty, an American partner at EMG accounting company, who has worked in both the American and Russian corporate environments.

"[In Russia] we even give 'birthday' bonuses, which I think would be unheard of in the States," Beatty said in an e-mail.

About half of Russian companies mark holidays such as New Year's and company anniversaries with special entertainment, according to Begin Group agency research.

About 40 percent of companies also celebrate smaller events throughout the year, including minor holidays, birthdays and project completions. Only eight percent of all Russian companies do not organize any special corporate events at all.

When it comes to partying, Beatty says his company follows the Russian tradition to the brim.

"We have at least four big parties a year with a lot of food and drink. Also the quality, substance of the parties is much more extensive than in normal U.S. companies," Beatty said.

A traditional corporate Christmas party in the U.S. would involve serving hors d'oeuvres and cocktails to the employees at the company office. Polite socializing lasts about two hours, after which everyone is happy to return home to families. A separate reception might be held for company partners and the board of directors.

"People tend to eat and drink less in the West, and socialize more during corporate events," said Julia Zavilevskaya, HR manager at DataArt, a local software producer with headquarters in New York.

"Our headquarters on 5th Avenue holds a traditional Christmas party for directors and business partners," she said. Being a Russian company, DataArt keeps some flavor of Russia even in New York: the party offers caviar and a wider drinks selection than usual, Zavilevskaya said.

Beatty explains the difference in corporate event cultures by the difference in general social practices.

"I think that a Russian 'collective' is a much closer group than it is in the U.S., where people tend to keep a distance between their work environment and their personal life. In Russia, the line is crossed more often than in many Western countries," he said.

Local HR managers, however, are convinced that crossing that line is a positive thing in personnel management - it promotes team spirit, increases company loyalty and overall justifies the money and time spent on the organization of extensive corporate events.

"It's hard to measure the so-called return on investment of such events, but creative and fun parties definitely lift the office mood, improve internal communications, and promote teambuilding - all of which result in increased productivity," said Tamara Achba, marketing director of Kelly Services recruitment agency in St. Petersburg.

She said for their 2005 New Year's celebration, the agency had a creative group of employees develop an original party scenario two to three months in advance.

Budgets for corporate holiday events usually vary from \$10,000 to \$60,000 in St. Petersburg, partly depending on whether the company organizes the event itself or engages an outside "party planner."

Unlike Moscow, where extravagance is taken a step further, the northern capital has not yet seen parties with budgets of over \$100,000, said Mikhail Voronin, the founder of Podyozhiki, a company that specializes in party organization, both private and corporate.

That does not mean St. Petersburg parties could be called restrained in any way. Northwest telecom giant Peterstar, recently purchased by Telecominvest, spent \$50,000 on its 2005 New Year's festivities. The company rented out the Ethnographic Museum, where it wined and dined 500 employees for over six hours.

"There was [popular cross-dressing singer] Verka Serdutchka and Maxim Leonidov [ex-lead singer of a late '80s pop group], acrobats, caricaturists and magicians. The show program was hosted by TV host Sergei Prokhorov," said a Peterstar employee who attended the event.

The evening started with a cocktail reception attended by everyone from top management to pick-up drivers, before transferring to a large hall for an evening meal and a concert, said the employee, who asked to remain anonymous.

"This is when I understood what a huge company ours is, just seeing everyone together in one room," the employee said, adding that spending time with colleagues outside the office definitely resulted in a warmer feeling towards the company.

"It was fun getting drunk together," the employee added with a smile.