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# SOCIALISING IS GOOD FOR YOU

Times may be hard, but professional socialising makes work life more pleasant and profitable, and most agents believe it is as relevant now as it has ever been. David Harris reports

**D**oes spending time in the pub help your career? This is a more complicated question than it might first appear. Old hands in the property business tend to be supportive of professional socialising, both with colleagues and clients, while at

the same time acknowledging that the amount of wining and dining involving agents has lessened as times have become hard.

But Richard Batten, senior partner at King Sturge, who has been 30 years in the business, says that socialising "is as

relevant now as it has ever been, but it happens less because people have time”.

For Batten, this makes it “even more important” that it should be encouraged, which King Sturge does through in-house lunches, parties taking place after work and drinks arranged after lectures held at company offices. Socialising may have changed from when he first came into the business – it is more “controlled” nowadays, he says, diplomatically – but it is every bit as vital to oiling the engines of the property world.

Batten believes that the benefits include better morale, team bonding and more creative thinking, all of which make staff happier and firms more agreeable and efficient places to work.

A good lunch or a decent drink can also help to seal property deals, although Batten doubts whether it is ever the main factor.

He says: “I don’t think I have ever put a deal down to being in a pub, but getting to know someone better might be why they are prepared to talk to you rather than to someone else.”

All of which is why King Sturge, among others, is not only “still happy for its staff to socialise, but positively encourages it”.

And it probably needs encouraging. Jonathan Simpson, partner at Sanderson Weatherall, argues that socialising has decreased as technology has advanced, with the internet and social media meaning that people do not meet in person as much as they once did.

This is a development Simpson regrets. He says: “It takes away the personal nature of deals because so much is done on the internet. Pubs, lunches and nights out seem like a bit of a memory nowadays.”

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It is also partly a matter of geography. Simpson’s office is in Stockton on Tees, his specialisation is industrial property, and there are quite a lot of smaller deals which simply don’t involve hospitality.

“Frankly, the size of some deals doesn’t justify a pub lunch,” he says.

Similarly, Stockton has far fewer agents than central London, so socialising between agents is also less common.

“People tend to work normal office hours and after work they are often heading home somewhere in the countryside,” says Simpson, whose view on the effects of e-mail and other modern communication on socialising in the business are echoed by many other agents in the provinces and in the capital, including Graham Brown, national head of industrial at Savills.

## IS SOCIALISING TOUGHER FOR WOMEN?

Do women in the property business find socialising any more of a challenge than the men? Does pub culture, for instance, still carry a more masculine than feminine bias?

Whether it does or not, there is no problem for female agents, according to Emma Goodford, partner at Knight Frank, who says: “There is no difference for chaps



or ladies... although, we are rather better at socialising.”

The difference Goodford does see is not so much between the sexes as between the generations, with younger agents favouring a pie and a pint while the older ones are more likely to go for lunch.

She says: “The junior guys are very good at making connections over a beer and the more established agents may favour lunch.”

The value of socialising is clear in Goodford’s mind, although she says it is only part of a fuller picture including “a mix of activity”. And with colleagues, she suggests that agents should not miss the opportunities to share knowledge or even just enjoy success.

Goodford adds: “Time becomes ever more demanded but there is the need to see peers to discuss market information, share ideas, arrange social events like the Office Agents Society annual ball or dinner in our part of the industry, and celebrate deals which, in this day and age, is too easily forgotten as we turn to the next one.”

Brown is another who believes that socialising is not only still important for the business, but more important than ever.

He says: “It’s fundamental. Agency work is all about networking. If you don’t socialise, you don’t get to know who is in the market and what is happening.”

Brown adds that this is even more the case in a market where there may be some distressed sales, because sellers are more likely to put things on the market by word of mouth than by

otherwise. Trevor Wood, a retail research specialist, says that a social network is quite strong in the sector, with organisations such as the Shop Agents Society and Accessible Retail organising regular social get-togethers. These include drinks on the first Friday of every month in London, golf days and other events, where almost the entire purpose is networking.

Wood acknowledges that “socialising has decreased in the past four years as people draw their horns in” but adds that

advertising them officially.

“For various reasons, many people want to be discreet about the deals they want to do, which makes personal contact a prerequisite,” says Brown, giving an example of one recent case where he was meeting a friend from GVA who had mentioned a potential sale to him. Brown followed this up by lining up a buyer and the deal was completed quickly because both agents knew what their clients wanted.

“It is so much easier to do a deal when you have a personal connection,” he says.

The idea that some sectors of the property world are more prone to socialising than others is widespread, with some suggesting that retail agents do less than, say, industrial or office agents.

Perhaps, but many involved in retail say

he thinks this is sometimes a mistake.

“The advantage of socialising with colleagues and clients is that it is a more relaxed environment away from the office and you can get to know people in a different way,” says Wood, adding: “Ultimately, I’m quite sure that can work to everyone’s advantage.”

Wood also points out that RICS runs various social groups intended to promote connections between different parts of the industry, in particular those for younger members.

It certainly seems that anybody coming into the property business in 2011 would be unwise to dismiss socialising with either their colleagues or clients as a waste of professional time. On the contrary, it can make work life more pleasant, and ultimately more profitable.