

# Office birthday luncheons: Do I have to attend?

**Question:** "Our department acknowledges birthdays by taking the birthday person out to lunch. The person gets to choose where to eat and the entire department leaves for an hour-and-a-half, at least. The problems that I have are: I have to surrender my lunchtime; the company doesn't foot the bill; I have various food that I cannot eat; we take turns driving in groups, which means I have to put extra gas in the car if it's my turn to drive. I am beyond busy with no slack time. I would rather decline these excursions and acknowledge the person's birthday directly on my own. How can I tactfully decline without appearing unsociable and not part of the group?" — *Anonymous, Los Angeles*

## Comments

It sounds like you're being very negative. I don't know how limited your income is but I can't imagine that it would break your bank or your lunch time to sacrifice a little time and money once a month or so to be a part of your team and support them. I don't think there really is a way you can bow out of all the lunches and not appear antisocial. It's totally your call, and I doubt that anyone would say anything to you, but for me, I'd make the effort. You'll still have plenty of lunches that you can spend by yourself.

alec...

**Posted by: Alec | February 22, 2008 at 02:14 PM**

We had birthday lunches many years ago. Now we purchase a cake and a card (company paid). This way, you can sign the card and/or give your own and if you want cake it's up to you. I don't know how many people are in your company or department, but this is the way we did it. No gas expense, no dietary foods to worry about, and still everyone gets to acknowledge everyone's birthday.

**Posted by: jane | February 22, 2008 at 02:20 PM**

Unless you have 52 employees in your department and this is an every week occurrence, which I am assuming you don't - is it really that much of a burden for you to attend a birthday lunch for people you work closely with a few times a year? I don't know too many people who travel great distances for lunch during their break to where it would make a significant difference in their gas tank level. Birthday lunches are supposed to be fun for everyone and they allow coworkers to bond outside of the office... I say suck it up, put on your happy face, and plan your schedule in advance so you make time for the lunches, otherwise you will be seen as unsociable and become the outsider and that in itself will start to cause problems.

**Posted by: Lauren | February 22, 2008 at 02:26 PM**

I have to say, I'm another one that doesn't particularly enjoy "forced celebrations". If I like/know you well enough to acknowledge your birthday, I'd like to choose how I want to do that, not be guilt-tripped into spending money/time on a group lunch AND doing my own thing. The same goes for bridal showers and baby showers at work. I have reached an age where I'm not overly concerned with what people think of my choices so if it is an event for someone I like, I participate. If it's someone I don't know well (or don't care to know well), I don't.

**Posted by: | February 22, 2008 at 02:34 PM**

My view has been this is another networking opportunity.

**Posted by: Anon | February 22, 2008 at 02:37 PM**

Celebrations within the workplace are a way to build community, that is the bigger picture. Taking time out of the work day, to honor an individual in my mind is first and foremost. I have always been able to find something on a menu to work, even if it a salad and requesting the restaurant to add grill chicken, etc. All restaurants now offer choices for patrons that are watching their weight or have some form of dietary restrictions. The gas issue is a mute point.

**Posted by: Jennifer | February 22, 2008 at 02:37 PM**

We have a "Birthday Club" for several of our related departments wherein we have a Food Day once a month for those celebrating their birthday. It is the employee's option to join the Club, and all participants are required to bring a dish to share whether it's their birthday month or not. If someone has a dietary requirement they can bring a dish of choice so they can nibble on that should other dishes not fit into their diet. If there's a month you chose not to participate by bringing a dish, you abstain from eating. A card is purchased by the admin from the birthday person's department and routed to all Birthday Club members for comment and signature. Some months, we don't have a birthday celebrant so the Food Day is overlooked. Our management allows us to have the food available from 9:00 until close (or until the food is gone) so many of us will eat at our desks and not take a formal lunch hour. For us it works well.

**Posted by: Kay | February 22, 2008 at 02:38 PM**

I have to agree with the others, you will come off as very anti-social to your co-workers. And in a way, the company may be footing the bill. Most people get an hour unpaid lunch. Are you getting any part of that hour and one half as paid work time?

**Posted by: Angela | February 22, 2008 at 02:40 PM**

I like Kay's suggestion. Maybe you do suggest that to the group where instead of going out you celebrate at work and everyone bring's a dish of their choice and all sign a card. This way you do not have to take such a long break and there is no gas. When you suggest it I would imagine you are not the only one feeling the same

way. I would however continue to do something because although inconvenient it is a nice tradition and creates a good company culture. To not participate at all would seem a bit anti-social and there is really no way around that.

**Posted by: Jocelyn | February 22, 2008 at 02:45 PM**

If lunch out and gas is not in your budget, explain this and bow out. This does not seem to me to be 'anti-social' - you just cannot afford it. Depending on the restaurant and with the price of gas being so high - you need a bank loan to participate. I think a nice card to acknowledge the birthday is good enough.

**Posted by: anonymus | February 22, 2008 at 02:52 PM**

Some options at my workplace: a quarterly potluck lunch to celebrate all birthdays in the past quarter: everybody brings something . Another department has Birthday-of the Month, but it's just cake & ice cream instead of lunch. Another department takes the birthday honoree(s) out to lunch quarterly and still another department orders takeout for festive lunch at the worksite. You didn't say how often these lunch events occur, but I think quarterly events could be a good compromise if you have a large department. You should refrain from "opting-out" of the festivities because you will be perceived as an outsider. This perception of being outside the group can affect your performance review and your chances for future advancement because managers want their subordinates to be team players.

**Posted by: Anon | February 22, 2008 at 03:08 PM**

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**Posted by: Anon | February 22, 2008 at 03:09 PM**

I do not think you are being selfish as all .. or negative. If you are, then I guess I would be too. I agree with YOU! I wouldn't want to go either. I agree that you are giving up your own personal lunch; it feels forced; you might not even feel you want to celebrate with the birthday guy/gal; and the gas situation is also concern for me; as well as the choice of restaurant and menu choices! But I'm also treated like you are.. if you don't go along with it, you're not a team player. There's no such thing as "honesty" anymore. Good luck!

**Posted by: I agree with you! | February 22, 2008 at 03:19 PM**

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**Posted by: Anon | February 22, 2008 at 03:22 PM**

"The company doesn't foot the bill."  
Therefore you are under no obligation to attend.  
The End

**Posted by: Read it again Sam | February 22, 2008 at 03:25 PM**

Just remember.....you are going to have a birthday to celebrate as well. If you do not make the effort to attend any of your fellow co-workers birthday celebrations, don't be surprised when no one wants to participate in celebrating yours and/or your birthday goes by totally unnoticed!

**Posted by: | February 22, 2008 at 03:49 PM**

I think that you should explain to your boss in a private setting that it is a financial strain on you to take part in this function. You should offer some of the suggestions that were listed in the comments as a "new" way to celebrate. I agree that there may be others that feel like you do but prefer to go along rather than say anything. Lunches are your time unless you are being paid, you should be able do what you like with them.

**Posted by: Kim | February 22, 2008 at 04:06 PM**

We used to have similar celebrations described so far by others, but it got to be too difficult to coordinate with everyone's schedule. We now have a "Bring your own birthday party!" policy. When it is your birthday, you bring the cake, donuts, fruit, punch, etc., and if you don't want to celebrate your birthday, you don't have to do anything. Some employees get very creative with decorations, a large pot of chili, and in a small office--pizza for everyone! Lots of fun and you only have to worry about one birthday a year. I understand this custom is popular in Europe.

**Posted by: C.Z. | February 22, 2008 at 04:14 PM**

As a single parent, that one lunch out could really blow my budget for the week. I have my gas budget down to where just one extra trip can create a hardship. I've been in that situation and honestly that was one deciding factor in leaving that company. It has nothing to do with not wanting to take a lunch with co-workers. Believe it or not some of us just can't afford the extravagance of a nice restaurant. What I did was just explain that I couldn't afford the expense and I really needed to be at my desk to catch the calls while everyone was out and then I would bring in cookies or a cake I baked for an afternoon "pick me up" from that heavy lunch. You could also keep up with when the birthdays are so that you could set aside a little extra money to enable you to

attend every now and then.

**Posted by: Brenda | February 22, 2008 at 04:23 PM**

At our plant, you bring in the donuts on YOUR birthday (or cookies or a cake you baked, or fruit tray, etc) in the morning. It really simplified things. And it is relatively inexpensive and everyone gets to enjoy.

**Posted by: Julie | February 22, 2008 at 04:29 PM**

I like Kay's suggestion. I also like the idea of the birthday person bringing his or her own food for a party. It's up to the individual to decide whether they want a party, and there are quite a few people who would prefer to celebrate a birthday in private with family and friends.

**Posted by: Anon | February 22, 2008 at 05:57 PM**

I work long hours and have developed relationships with the people in my office. We created the office tradition of birthday lunches so there are no feelings of obligation for birthday gifts. My birthday was last month, I invited everyone but not everyone was able to attend, which didn't bother me. I had fun with the people who did come. It wasn't an expensive restaurant, it was just time to enjoy each other's company outside of the office.

I agree with those that said if you can't be bothered to join in an occasional birthday celebration, don't be surprised when your birthday goes unnoticed.

**Posted by: M | February 22, 2008 at 09:36 PM**

I agree with "I agree with you!" Time is too precious these days to be "forced" into birthday, shower, and other celebrations. While it is nice to acknowledge co-workers, it can be done in ways that don't take so much time and money. Time is very valuable to most of us. Personally, when I'm not squeezing in a work out during lunch, I am doing necessary errands which otherwise I would not have time to do before or after work. I don't think it's selfish or negative at all to decline these celebrations. I believe people who think they should celebrate every little occasion simply have too much time on their hands and need to consider the situation of others. If that's what they choose to do, fine; but don't impose on others to participate.

**Posted by: AMD | February 25, 2008 at 09:47 AM**

Birthdays are a wonderful way to acknowledge others, HOWEVER, if you are not in a position to spend "X" amount on a celebration, why feel OBLIGATED to participate?

"Celebrations" in general have a tendency to morph into extravagant expenditures that many can't/won't afford. Why create an environment that makes many uncomfortable?

A nice card goes a long way, so leave the celebrating to those closest friends and family.

**Posted by: | February 25, 2008 at 11:05 AM**

Although others may think you are being negative, you're not. Besides, there are folks who may not want to/be able to attend such celebrations due to cultural/religious beliefs. Since those need to be accommodated, so do your personal preferences. I expect other folks in your group may feel the same but are not sure how to bow out. It's not appropriate for an employer or co-workers to force you to attend birthday lunches, especially at your own expense. No one knows your financial situation more than you and no one should push you into spending money you don't want to. I would follow some other suggestions posted such as potlucks, cards, etc. These celebrations can get out of hand and need to be organized more efficiently so that they can be combined and occur less frequently.

**Posted by: | February 26, 2008 at 10:34 AM**

The question is: "How can I tactfully decline without appearing unsociable and not part of the group?"

If you skip every time, yes, you will appear unsociable. How much does that matter to you? If these lunches occur every month, I would probably decline about every other time using an excuse such as "I am too far behind in my work," or "I have an appointment during my lunch that day," or "I simply can't afford a lunch out this month." I would apologize to the birthday person for missing, and give a card or token.

**Posted by: Lisa | February 27, 2008 at 09:42 AM**

You are not being antisocial or selfish at all. It is inappropriate for an employer or coworkers to obligate anyone to spend their own time or money on anything. If bowing out affects your performance review, it's time for a visit to HR. I would be willing to bet you are not the only one who feels trapped into participating, and if you politely decline and give a nice card instead, others will gratefully follow your example.

At my work, the office manager brings in a light breakfast for each person's birthday, paid for by our "Employee Fund", which is funded, in part, by office paper recycling. Once a month, we have cake and ice cream to acknowledge everyone who had a birthday that month, also paid for out of the employee fund.

**Posted by: Lisa | February 29, 2008 at 02:24 PM**

Suggestions and comments are all over the map on this one. I grew up in a household where we never acknowledged any birthdays or holidays or anything like that. So to celebrate these things seems odd to me. Our belief is if you care for someone, you will tell or show that person how you feel every day, not just one day a year. So, for my family and friends and even co-workers with whom I have a "relationship", I try to tell them how much I appreciate them or value them and I bring un-anticipated, un-asked for, un-expected little gifts - it could be homemade cookies, etc. - at a time that works for me financially and is just a bit of a nice surprise for the person.

**Posted by: | February 29, 2008 at 02:47 PM**

I do not feel that you are being negative. In fact, I agree with you totally on forced celebrations, you are put in an uncomfortable position and no one but you knows your own financial situation and people who make comments like "it won't break your bank" lack intelligence, that is clear.

**Posted by: Michelle | February 29, 2008 at 03:00 PM**

What about the folks who do not celebrate birthdays? ( Jehovah Witness) Although I am not one, I do believe in celebrating birthdays and I am sensitive to the fact that everyone does not do as I do including celebrate Christmas and Easter . As a suggestion, offices could look for other ways to network, socialize, and team build with one another outside of birthdays and major holidays. Attempt to create your own social networks that work with your current office culture. For example, I work in Higher Education, therefore from May to early August our work is often less hectic than during September to May. Before staff vacations begin in June, our office has a cookout . Our department head supplies the meats and we all sign up to bring something. It is really nice and fun. We do some debriefing of the year while talking about our summer plans.

In the end, I would prefer to know that we can all do the job that we are hired to do and look for ways to work with one another well so that the organization can be successful. I would rather have lunch with a professional development expert or go for a walk in that hour. We can always use strategies on how to do our jobs better. I prefer to enjoy special days and Holidays with my family and close friends . When I know it is colleagues birthday ( that I have a close relationship with) I just send them a birthday email message.

**Posted by: MJJ | February 29, 2008 at 03:01 PM**

We have a petty cash fund, that we use to buy bagels/cream cheese or muffins for the birthday person; make a small birthday banner, and put it on the persons door and invite those that want to, to partake in the food. Most stop by and wish the person happy birthday or send an email. It's much easier, not any obligation on anyone's part and the birthday person doesn't feel slighted. Keep is simple.

**Posted by: judy | February 29, 2008 at 03:02 PM**

As with all personal issues, these types of personnel concerns seem to get blown out of proportion. It's very simple and people should not get bent out of shape...if you want to participate, do so, and if you don't want to, don't. Why can't everyone just understand that we all aren't in the same socioeconomic situation and contributions to lunches, gifts, etc. are made at the detriment of being able to feed your own family. Let's get back to basics and not try to outperform the "Jones'". I say, hold a celebration at work and let the company pay for the cake. If any others care to contribute decorations, cards or gifts, they can do so. The birthday guy/gal probably will have so much fun eating and laughing that he/she won't have time to open the gift(s) at lunch anyway. That way, nobody feels bad because their name wasn't read in front of their peers. Only the birthday guy/gal knows who honored their birthday on a more personal/friend level. Everyone who wants to, come for cake and ice-cream and/or fruit or whatever the birthday person wants, and leave the rest on a person by person basis. LIGHTEN UP, and have a Happy Birthday or Happy Anniversary!

**Posted by: Linda | February 29, 2008 at 03:23 PM**

It sounds like this is a standard celebration for birthdays in your department and not a surprise to the individual. In which case I would approach that person directly and explain...

"I am sorry and hope it doesn't offend you but I just don't have the time be part of the lengthy celebration today..."

Followed by an offer of a "replacement" such as...

"but maybe we could do lunch on another day" - giving you the chance to get to know each other.

or say

"but I did get you..." while offering a small token. If you don't want to get to know them for whatever reason then a small token would save you face, not cost you much and be a pleasant surprise that you actually thought to get he/she something.

If the person is a really good friend then he/she will understand and welcome more private plans another time.

As for the other coworkers who opinions shouldn't really matter but always seem to...chances are someone is going to ask where you are or mention your absence and the birthday person will have the answer!!

Hope this helps!

**Posted by: Trace | February 29, 2008 at 03:24 PM**

I am not a fan of potlucks. You spend more time & money preparing the dish than it would be to eat at an average restaurant. If you are an admin you are obligated to make a nice dish, not bring a bag of chips or soda. I think that those who want to get together should and go to a restaurant. No hard feelings if you don't want to or cannot attend.

**Posted by: | February 29, 2008 at 03:59 PM**

Wow! This has gotten blown WAY out of proportion. I'm a senior executive admin and I rarely go out to lunch. I would hate it if my teammates expected me to participate in every celebratory lunch, not just because of the added time and expense, but because it loses its value when overdone.

We have a birthday cake once a month for all of the administrative assistants who have a birthday that month. We have it as part of our regular monthly admin meeting. I make all the arrangements and the company pays. If smaller groups want to take someone out for lunch to celebrate, that's their call, but there is never an expectation that everyone is expected to participate. That's an absurd expectation. In this day and age of increased workloads without commensurate pay, no one has a right to determine whether another person should spend their own money on ANYTHING, and that includes preparing a pot luck dish.

For those individuals I consider real friends, I buy a birthday card which I give to them in private. If one of the senior managers has a birthday, I might buy a card and have all the senior managers sign it, but only if I have time.

I'm here to do a job, and while I greatly value the friendships I have in the office, my participation or lack thereof in activities outside the office has absolutely nothing to do with our friendship or how I am viewed by the other admin staff.

**Posted by: cjmoore | February 29, 2008 at 05:14 PM**

So, so glad I'm out of that rat race! I have my own business and work from home at [www.virtuallyyours925.com](http://www.virtuallyyours925.com)! I use [www.sendoutcards.com/rmparker](http://www.sendoutcards.com/rmparker) to send out birthday cards to my business associates. So much easier and so NOT expensive! They are remembered and it's not an expensive luncheon on my part. People need to understand that we may have different budgetary constraints and it's not being anti-social...we just can't afford it! Period! And if we were to spend say \$20-30, perhaps we'd rather spend it doing something else. It's a matter



of choice and this is still America!

**Posted by: VY925 | March 01, 2008 at 06:40 PM**

I have to wonder why you don't want to go because I think there is more to it than gas money or food choices. Is this a group of people you don't particularly care for or get along with? If you truly like being part of this group, I would put extra effort into going occasionally. You did not state the frequency of these lunches. Would it be too difficult to make a sacrifice and go once a month? Actually, the change of scenery might shed a different light on your fellow coworkers. After several of these birthday lunches, you may look forward to the change in your lunchtime routine!

**Posted by: Lisa | March 03, 2008 at 08:49 AM**

Could you suggest that they do something else for a change of pace? We have 15 employees, and every year we change what we do for birthdays so it doesn't get old. This year, the birthday person gets a half-day off in the same payweek as their birthday. In years past we have baked a cake for the person, bought a cake for the person, everyone chipped in \$2 to buy a DVD or CD for the person, had mini pot-lucks, and other things. Each year it is different.

**Posted by: Mark | March 03, 2008 at 12:21 PM**

Some of the comments received are a bit rude (i.e. It sounds like you're being very negative; break your bank or your lunch time to sacrifice a little time and money once a month or so to be a part of your team and support them; is it really that much of a burden for you to attend a birthday lunch for people you work closely with a few times a year; I say suck it up, put on your happy face, and plan your schedule in advance so you make time for the lunches, otherwise you will be seen as unsociable and become the outsider and that in itself will start to cause problems; you will come off as very anti-social to your co-workers)! You should not be forced to attend a birthday luncheon! Me personally, I can care less if my birthday is celebrated at work. That is a time to celebrate with my family. No everyone is on the same salary scale. I have a very large family with a birthday or two each month. If I am invited to a birthday luncheon at work and do not feel I have the funds I do not hesitate to decline – in a polite manner.

**Posted by: Debbie | March 04, 2008 at 08:56 AM**

I don't think employees should be guilt-tripped into going to birthday luncheons. I think that it is more convenient if you have a potluck at the office so that everybody has something that they like to eat instead of having to go to a restaurant and pay for food that they don't necessarily like - it's a waste of money. Those who want to go out, by all means go, but don't give no guilt trips on those who don't really feel like going to these lunches, unless you are willing to pay for everybody.

**Posted by: Julie | March 06, 2008 at 05:11 PM**

Waste of time. Waste of money. Those who want to go out to lunch should go. But potlucks are a good way for everybody to enjoy themselves and to eat what they like instead of paying for meals that they don't necessarily

like.

**Posted by: Julie | March 06, 2008 at 05:13 PM**

I would definitely lie and say you have an appointment that day, or cannot make it, etc. If you use the excuse that you're always too busy, then it makes the others look bad, which means more pressure on you to go.

I personally am labeled anti-social because I don't like to go to all work functions (during or after), I don't enjoy doing the whole lunch birthday thing either (and for those that said, what's one lunch, I usually pay about \$15 when we go out, that's a lot for one meal for me).

I'm here to work, not to socialize. I like my co-workers, but they are not my friends. And yes, my birthday has been skipped over...not because I don't attend, but because everyone flat out forgot.

Personally, I go to one out of every 3 or 4 birthday lunches. I figure, it's enough to keep people happy, keep me off the radar, and little enough for me to afford.

Good luck.

**Posted by: | March 11, 2008 at 05:59 PM**