

Rocky Mountain News / The Rubber Ceiling
Abstinence doesn't pay

Just as I suspected – my checking account is doomed to mediocrity. According to a recent study by the Journal of Labor Research and the Reason Foundation, drinkers earn 10 - 14% more money than abstainers. I guess I have some catching up to do.

It so happens that I've never been much of a drinker. It's not a moral or medical position for me. I just don't much care for the taste of alcohol, whether it shows up in a beer mug, wine glass, or martini shaker. The only alcoholic beverages I like are the pastel variety that come with fruit and umbrellas. I learned years ago that if I wanted to convey an aura of sophistication, ordering a sissy drink was worse than opting for club soda, so I resigned myself to a generally non-alcoholic lifestyle. This seems like a wiser position every year: the older I get, the worse I feel the morning after a couple of drinks.

The researchers who put this discouraging study together theorize that drinkers earn noticeably more because they have a larger social network than their more sober peers. That network is the source of more job and business opportunities, the theory goes, so the drinkers are able to lurch their way to higher pay. After all these years of volunteering to be the designated driver, I'm now feeling a little resentful. Apparently, while I've had my eyes on the road and my hands on the wheel, my social network has been busy negotiating promotions and raises in the back seat. It hardly seems fair. Come to think of it, it hardly seems possible, considering how busy they are singing Jimmy Buffett songs.

Maybe there's another explanation. Happy hour on Friday is a traditional way to let off steam after working oneself down to a nubbin all week. The more stressful the job, the more we're inclined to get silly when we can. So maybe drinkers think they're working harder than those who don't need to let down their hair. If that's the case, I guess drinking bosses figure that rewarding their fellow bar-hoppers is just a matter of recognizing the most diligent employees.

In any event, we non-drinkers will just have to adopt some protective coloring if we want to keep up, especially during the holiday season. I used to work with a guy who, when the going got tough, would refer darkly to a quart of scotch that he kept in his file cabinet for such occasions. I never saw the bottle, and I never saw any evidence that my colleague was anything but sensible, hard-working, and unimpaired. I think he concocted a myth to make himself seem a little wilder, and I think he had the right idea. Just because you don't drink doesn't mean you can't fake it. I've learned a few tricks along the way, including the inadvisability of consuming stuff I can't stand. The sip-and-grimace approach just doesn't look very convincing. On the other hand, I've learned how to carry a drink without partaking. And I've also learned that a glass of tomato juice with a celery stalk can pass as a bloody Mary. It's not as refreshing as club soda, but it has other benefits – a serving of vegetables, and maybe a raise.

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