



# Office Etiquette 101

A White Paper by the Haworth Knowledge and Research Team

“Whenever two people come together and their behavior affects one another, you have etiquette. Etiquette is not some rigid code of manners, it’s simply how persons’ lives touch one another.” - Emily Post<sup>1</sup>

Not so long ago, offices were places where legions of similarly dressed people all arrived at the same time to sit aligned in neat rows and perform nearly identical tasks. At lunchtime, they vacated the workspace for an hour to come back refreshed and ready for an afternoon of highly predictable behavior. It was boring — but at least you knew what to expect from others and how to act.

That was then. This is now:

- Casually dressed people come and go at different times.
- Offices are getting smaller and closer together.
- Some people share offices and others don’t have any assigned office — they just find a place when they come in — while others don’t come in at all.
- There’s a kitchen to make your own meals and more food is available, from sodas and coffee to candy, bagels, and snacks.
- There are more meeting spaces mixed in with cubicles, creating team spaces, and more open, collaborative spaces for impromptu meetings.
- More people are working part time, flex time, as temps, or on contract.
- As a result of downsizing, fewer people are trying to accomplish more.

Although a relaxed work environment has many advantages for worker recruitment, retention, and productivity, these changing work conditions can create a sense of frustration when stressful noise and distractions abound. Adding to the confusion is the way different types of casual work and meeting spaces are being mixed in with more traditional office areas. People begin to wonder — what behaviors are okay in which spaces? Developing and communicating a set of shared expectations can help create a more positive office atmosphere and reintroduce a sense of predictability that lets people use their time more effectively.

### APPEARANCES COUNT

When people work on different schedules, or no set schedule, it can be difficult to find the people they need to see. This is especially frustrating when one person drives to the office to collaborate with others who simultaneously decide to work from home that day. To save work group coordination time, it can be helpful to set core hours or core days when everyone puts in an appearance or is otherwise available to the rest of the work group.

Regardless of how your organization decides to handle more flexible work arrangements, there are several behavior modifications that can smooth the way:

- Use sign-out boards — electronic, if possible. This will allow coworkers to locate each other without phone calls and search parties.
- Determine what kind of notice is required for employees working from home, including timing and contact information.
- If coworkers are inheriting one another’s calls and crises when they are away, tasks may need to shift to balance the burden. Some employees may need to voluntarily cut back on time away until a fair way to manage any overflow can be worked out.
- Coordinate set work times for administrative support to be available. For example, if a group routinely needs secretarial help preparing for early-morning meetings, allowing the secretary the flexibility to show up later will cause frequent disappointments. Take the time to work this out before trouble starts.
- If setting their own hours leads to some members of the group abusing the system or becoming unavailable, it can cause workgroup problems. Everyone suffers and formality has a way of returning.

<sup>1</sup> (Post & Post, 2005)



Talking during a meeting is disrespectful to others. When it's absolutely necessary to take a call it is best to step out of the meeting.

### LET'S MEET

Meetings are frequently named as the biggest office time wasters. They don't need to be. With people working different hours, meetings are especially important for setting project directions and getting to know coworkers. Consistent meeting behavior helps make this time count.

Smart meeting tips:

- Meetings need to begin and end as scheduled and attendees must be on time. If people feel their time is not being respected, they will stop taking meetings seriously and refrain from attending.
- If a full hour is more than necessary, a 30-minute block can be scheduled — and ended even sooner if possible.
- Each meeting needs a clear goal that is communicated to attendees in the meeting invitation. After the meeting goal has been met, attendees should be dismissed.
- All participants should silence phones and other devices during meetings.

If something truly urgent comes up, they can leave the meeting and attend to it privately. Silencing a phone is the most acceptable as even the vibrate tone can be heard or felt across the room and be distracting.

- Texting or emailing during a meeting is disrespectful to others. Again, similar to phone calls, do so only when absolutely necessary.
- If the meeting space is tucked into an area of cubicles, participants should be aware that people are trying to concentrate nearby. If the meeting cannot be conducted at conversational volume levels, it should be moved to a space where the noise will not disrupt others.
- Spaces should be returned to their original arrangement when the meeting ends. Marker boards should be erased, papers cleared, borrowed items returned, etc., so the next group gets a fresh space.
- Meeting hosts should plan ahead, checking the space before the meeting starts to be sure needed equipment is there and working. Are markers, flip charts, or other necessary supplies in the space? Are there enough copies of handouts? Is there adequate technology if the meeting is paperless or virtual?

### ELECTRONIC INTERACTIONS

Email is a great tool for business communications. It eliminates printed memos, facilitates the quick exchange of files, and can speed up the business process of approvals, authorizations, and more, but mistakes can happen and cause misunderstandings.

A few basic rules to follow:<sup>2</sup>

- Email is not an excuse to be lazy with your grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Spell-check doesn't detect all mistakes. Read through your message (out loud) before sending.
- Don't use abbreviations, characters, or emoticons in your business email. Keep it formal with a clear, direct message.
- Email doesn't guarantee the message will actually be read or received. For important exchanges, always use another means of communication to let your recipient know to expect your message.
- If sending a mass email, blind copy all recipients unless the reply all function is absolutely necessary.

### LET'S EAT

In many offices, people are eating at their desks and working through lunch. Food is catered in for lunch meetings and snacks are available throughout the day. Those who work late can get quite elaborate with desktop dinner plans.

The result is often an all-day cacophony of soda-can hisses, microwave beeps, and the percussion of silverware on dishes. Add strong food smells and it's a recipe for workgroup distraction.

<sup>2</sup> (TerHorst, 2011)

In-office dining tips should be observed:

- China and silverware shouldn't be used within 50 feet of anyone trying to concentrate. For formal dining, go out.
- Encourage the use of areas outside of workstations for lunch. Ergonomically speaking, it's better to take a break. If there's no café, break space, or cafeteria, find a spot outside or near a window. Or take the opportunity to interact with others over lunch in a casual space. Allow coworkers to concentrate in their work areas.
- Those who feel they must eat at their desks should keep noises and smells to a minimum. What might smell good to one person could be offensive to another, so be mindful of how the food smells.
- When choosing food for a meeting, make sure to consider meals that are low in fat, salt, and calories to accommodate health-conscious workers. Similarly, consult with attendees who may have dietary restrictions or food sensitivities in order to provide options for everyone.
- Anytime someone eats in the office, it's their responsibility to be sure the space is clean and ready for the next person who might use it.

## CUBE LIFE

More than 60 percent of American offices use some type of open plan layout or cubicle arrangement.<sup>3</sup> Open plan layouts have been shown to increase collaboration; however, they do require occupants to have a basic consideration of one another in order for the space to work well.

"Getting along" in the open plan:

- Residents of the open plan must respect each others' privacy. It should be understood that people shouldn't borrow items from others' workstations or hover over their shoulder while they finish a phone call. Never open drawers or cabinets in other peoples' stations without permission.
- Another person's computer should never be used without permission. If one does have permission to use another employee's PC, settings should not be changed. Email and files should be considered confidential and off-limits.
- If the organization has rules regarding space decoration, they should be clearly communicated to all employees. Even if there is no written policy, pictures or other items that could offend coworkers are never a good idea.
- Music should be played on headphones, not speakers — tastes in music vary too much for anyone to choose for a whole group.
- Those who share cubicles should always remember to clean up each time they leave and store shared materials where coworkers will be able to find them.

- Everyone sharing a printer should take responsibility for reloading paper and save especially large print jobs for low-use times.
- Cubicles, by nature, do not afford privacy when it comes to sound. Chewing ice and clipping nails can distract and annoy neighbors, as can using a speakerphone to check voicemail.
- The whole team needs to respect one another's concentration. When someone is deeply involved in typing, reading, or thinking, they should not be interrupted.
- The work group should discuss its unique culture and code of conduct. For example, in some organizations it's acceptable to carry on a discussion with someone 10 or more feet away. In others, this would be a problematic.

## VIRTUAL AND PART-TIME LIFE

Some workers are on the road four days a week or more. They do not need to maintain personal space at the office, but do need to stop by once in awhile to meet with others or clear up administrative tasks. Others work less than a standard full-time schedule.



When working in an open-plan office be mindful of the noise level and proximity to coworkers.

<sup>3</sup> (Veitch, Charles, & Newsham, 2004)

Tips for virtual workers:

- If there is a concierge or reservation system, all workers should use it to make their plans known before coming in.
- Spaces should be vacated on time, unless nobody is waiting for the space.
- Belongings must be cleared out and borrowed items must be returned upon leaving.
- Contact information should be available for other employees to reach the virtual worker when they're out of the office.

Tips for part-time or variable-schedule workers:

- Coworkers should be aware of part-time employees' work schedules, whether via an electronic calendar or posted schedule in the work station.
- Employees should be reminded to clean up before leaving and delegate tasks that might need attention while they are away.

The more work styles change, the more new issues will come up in the workplace. Flexible work styles often communicate that the individual is central and that group norms are no longer important. With some patience and consideration of others, however, the workplace can remain a comfortable and productive place for everyone.

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