

## Office Etiquette 101



Not long ago, offices were places where legions of similarly dressed people arrived at the same time, sat in neat rows of desks and performed nearly identical tasks. At noon, everybody vacated the office, then returned in exactly one hour, refreshed and ready for an afternoon of highly predictable behavior. It *was* boring, but at least you knew what to expect and how to act.

### **That was then, this is now:**

- Casually dressed people come and go at different times.
- Many organizations have reduced office sizes and moved them closer together
- Some people share offices
- Some people have no assigned office – they find a workspace when they arrive each day
- Often there is a kitchen on-site where employees make their own meals anytime
- There are more snacks available – soda, coffee, candy, bagels etc.
- There are more meeting spaces mixed in with cubicles, creating “teamspace”
- There are more open, collaborative spaces for impromptu meetings
- More people are working part time, flex time, as temps or on contract
- Fewer people are trying to do more work as a result of downsizing and a tight labor market

Although a relaxed work environment has many advantages for worker recruitment, retention and productivity, new work conditions can create confusion, frustration and stress when noise and other distractions are common. As casual workspaces and meeting

spaces are mixed with more traditional offices, workers have a greater number of distractions to deal with, while at the same time common behavior rules become blurred. Which behaviors are OK in which spaces?

Developing and communicating a set of shared expectations can create a more positive office atmosphere. Such “rules” reintroduce a sense of predictability, lower stress and allow people to focus more on the tasks at hand. Some suggestions follow:

### **Appearances Count**

With people working various schedules, it’s becomes difficult to simply track down the people you need to see at any given time. For example, if one person drives to the office to collaborate with others who are working at home that day, the effort is wasted. To save coordination time, it is helpful to set core hours or core days when each member of a work group will be on-site, or otherwise available.

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

Etiquette tips:

- Always use sign-out boards (electronic if possible). This allows coworkers to quickly and easily locate each other
- Have a predetermined method of notifying other group members if a person decides to work at home; how to notify, who to notify, when to notify, contact information
- If you find out that coworkers are inheriting your calls and crises when you work away from the main office, take on extra tasks that help them, or cut back voluntarily on time away until a fair way to manage this overflow can be worked out
- Coordinate set work times for your administrative support person to be available to the work group. For example, if the group routinely needs secretarial help preparing for early-morning meetings, flexibility for the secretary to show up later will cause frequent disappointments. Take the time to work this out before trouble starts.
- Dressing for success no longer means formality. But if you are meeting with customers or others who expect more formality, dress appropriately. If your organization has a dress code, find out what it is.
- If you have the option to set your own hours, don’t abuse the system or become unavailable. If this way of working does not get results or causes workgroup problems, everybody suffers and formality has a way of returning.

### **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 more important than ever as a way to set project directions and get to know coworkers. Consistent meeting behavior helps make this time count.

Etiquette tips:

- Be on time. Busy people don't want to wait and will bail out if others don't show up.
- If meetings routinely don't start when scheduled, people will stop taking meeting notices seriously and nobody will show up
- Plan ahead when it's your meeting. Check the space before the meeting starts to be sure needed equipment is there and working. Are markers, flip charts or other needed supplies in the space? Do you have enough copies of handouts?
- Start and end meetings as scheduled. People have other places to be and other things to do.
- If you don't need a full hour, just schedule 30 minutes and end even sooner if you can.
- Get to the point. First announce the purpose and the desired outcome of the meeting. When you've reached your desired outcome, end the meeting.
- Turn off your phone during meetings. Your conversation about the taking the dog to the vet is not pertinent to the other people at the table. If something truly urgent does come up, leave the meeting and attend to it privately.
- If the meeting space is tucked into an area of cubicles, be aware that people are trying to concentrate. If the meeting cannot be conducted at conversational volume levels, move the meeting to a space where the noise will not disrupt others.
- If you rearrange a meeting space, put it back into usable order before leaving. Erase marker boards, take down charts and clear up all papers etc. If you borrow items from other meeting spaces, return them promptly.

## **Let's Eat**

In many offices, people often work through lunch and dinner; eating snacks, even elaborate desktop dinners at their workstation. Food is often catered in, and snack machines are everywhere. The result is an all-day cacophony of soda HISSES, microwave BEEPS, CRUNCHING, MUNCHING and the BANG-SCRAPE-BANG of silverware on dishes. Add a variety of strong food aromas, and you have a recipe for workgroup distraction.

Etiquette tips:

- Don't use china and silverware within 50 feet of anyone who's trying to concentrate. If you want formal dining, go out.
- Use office areas outside of workstations for lunch. It's better ergonomically to take a break, and routinely eating quickly is not healthy. If there is no café, break space or cafeteria, find a spot outside or by a window. Or take the opportunity to interact with others over lunch in a casual space.
- If you have to eat at your desk, choose "quiet" foods. Cut back on the crunchy stuff. Stirring ice tea with a vengeance is also hard on group peace. Also think twice about foods that have strong odors – remember that other people will have to live with those odors all afternoon.
- Get a grip. Coworkers may be trying to cut back on fat, salt and calories. If you are choosing food for a meeting, offer healthy options and/or agree as a group on whether the meeting needs to include food.

- Be respectful to the next group to use a teaming space. Always clean up unless you know there is a cleaning crew on the way.

## **Cube Life**

58% of American offices use some type of open plan layout. Commonly called cubicles, these workstations offer some privacy, but typically do not have doors or ceilings. Although open plan layouts increase collaboration, they also require basic consideration of others.

Etiquette tips:

- Respect others' privacy. Don't borrow items from other peoples' workstations or hover over their shoulder while they finish a phone call. Never open drawers or cabinets in other peoples' stations without permission
- Never use a computer without permission. "PC" stands for "Personal Computer," surprise visitors are rarely welcome.
- If you do have permission to use someone's PC, remember that settings should not be changed without the owner's knowledge. E-mail and files should be considered confidential and off limits.
- Your organization may have some rules about decorating. Check with your facilities person or coworkers to determine what the corporate culture accommodates. 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.
- If you share a cubicle, remember to clean up after yourself each time you leave and store shared materials where the coworker will be able to find them.
- When using a shared printer, reload paper when it's your turn and save huge print jobs for times when your work group will not be in a hurry for printed documents.
- Just because you have some visual privacy, don't assume your annoying habits are a secret. Chewing ice and clipping nails are not ways to make friends in open plans.
- Respect your coworkers' concentration. If you see someone deeply involved in typing, reading or thinking, come back later or send an email if possible.
- Using speakerphones keeps your hands free, but ties up both ears of every coworker in your immediate area. Not a good tradeoff—pick up the receiver, or get a headset.
- Group cultures vary. In some organizations it's OK to carry on a discussion with someone ten-feet away. In others, that would cause distraction. Pay attention to the conduct in your office and if there's a problem, talk it over with your work group.

## **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 in occasionally for meetings or administrative tasks. Others work may work part time schedules.

Etiquette tips for virtual workers:

- If there is a concierge or reservation system, make your plans known before your arrival
- Vacate spaces when you said you would, unless nobody is waiting for the space
- Clean up your belongings when you leave and return borrowed items
- Leave contact information for people to reach you while you are out

Etiquette tips for part-time or variable-schedule workers:

- Remember to view your involvement from the group's perspective. Don't just rush in and announce what you need from them while explaining that you don't have time to help them. Show some give and take.
- Let coworkers know your work schedule. Block out all non-work times on electronic calendar systems and/or post a work schedule in your work station
- Clean up after yourself before leaving and delegate things that could need attention while you are out. Leave tracks. For example, if you have the key to a supply cabinet and will be out for three days, who takes the key during that time?

The more our work styles change, the more new issues will come up. Flexible work styles often communicate that the individual is the center of a universe 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.

©Haworth, Inc.