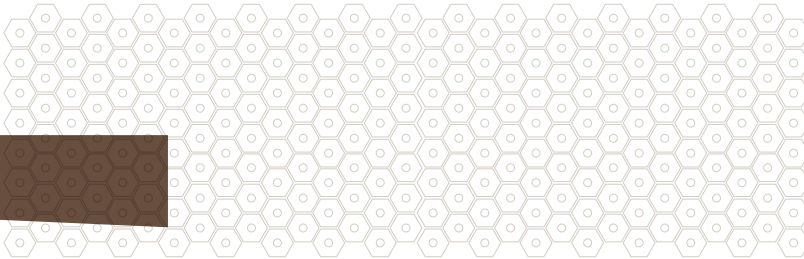


A thin green line starts from the left edge of the page, goes up, then right, then down, ending at a small green square. Another green line starts from the top edge, goes right, then down, ending at another small green square.

Office Etiquette 101

A dark brown horizontal bar with a wavy bottom edge, partially overlapping the honeycomb pattern.

Judy Voss



HAWORTH®

WORKSTYLES WHITE PAPER
THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK AND TRENDS

Office Etiquette 101

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 have gotten 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
- There's a kitchen to make your own meals and more food around, 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 you 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.
- Dressing for success no longer means formality. But sometimes customers and others expect a bit more formality. Know the dress code and be prepared to adapt it to special situations.
- 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.

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:

- Everyone needs to 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
- 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?
- Meetings need to start and end as scheduled. People have other places to be and other things to do.
- If a full hour is more than necessary, a 30-minute block can be called — and ended even sooner if possible.
- Meetings need a clear goal. The meeting owner should let people know the purpose of the meeting first. When that decision is reached and other necessary goals are met, the meeting should be ended.
- All participants should turn off phones and PDAs during meetings. If something truly urgent comes up, they can leave the meeting and attend to it privately.
- 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.

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.

In-office dining tips:

- 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 may want to keep noises and smells to a minimum.
- Workers may be trying to cut back on fat, salt, and calories. When choosing food for a meeting, healthy options should be included.
- 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 cubicles (Veitch, Charles, & Newsham, 2004). Open plan layouts have been shown to increase collaboration but do require basic consideration of others to work well.

Getting along in the open plan:

- Residents of the open plan must respect 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. E-mail and files should be considered confidential and off limits.
- If the organization has rules about decorating, they should be known by 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 voice mail.
- 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 what is okay. For



example, in some organizations it's acceptable to carry on a discussion with someone 10 or more feet away. In others, that would be a problem distraction.

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.

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. 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.

Reference

Veitch, J.A., Charles, K.E., & Newsham, G.R. (2004, October). Workstation design for the open-plan office. Retrieved August 30, 2009, from the National Research Council Canada website: <http://www.nrc-cnrc.gc.ca/eng/ibp/irc/ctus/ctus-n61.html>