Evolving e-Etiquette in the Workplace

By Meg Langland

New college graduates used to texting and checking Facebook during class should be aware of policies regarding personal use of the Internet and electronic devices in the workplace.

Technology has drastically changed the rules in the workplace, so much so that we cannot imagine what a day would be like without a desktop computer, laptop, PDA, flash drive, and cell phone. Recent college graduates coming in to the workplace are adept at using this technology, accomplishing their work in record speed while accessing a tremendous amount of data through research and creativity. However talented these new recruits are, they often find there is a new set of rules governing their technical skills in a workplace that values their talents but limits their freedom.

For many interns or new graduates, this radical change from campus to corporate requires a paradigm shift from a "free-range" approach to using technology at their will to a more controlled, company-centered, and productive approach. Instead of being able to spend as much time as they want checking their Facebook or MySpace account, or responding to every text or e-mail message when it appears on their screen or phone, these new hires are suddenly faced with rules and policies curtailing their use behavior. In the current campus culture where instant communication, individuality, and creativity are valued, and, more often than not, expressed *electronically,* this adjustment can be difficult.

Switching from using computers for *personal and social* purposes to *business and professional* purposes during working hours is challenging for many new hires and interns. With 85 percent of college students logging on to social networking sites for several hours on a daily basis, this generation must realize that the company computer is *company property* and consequently needs to be used with a whole new, and often very different, set of rules.[1]

Security of company information, often a huge concern to employers, is a concept that may seem foreign to new hires who are accustomed to swapping flash drives, sharing passwords with close friends, and often leaving their computer screens unlocked for long periods of time. Unfortunately, many new hires only discover they have violated their organization's security or "general use" rules governing electronic devices *after* they make the mistake of logging on to an unauthorized site, leaving a company laptop unsecured, or downloading forbidden programs. Other potential landmines the new hire has to navigate are the expectations of communication *within* their new work environment; i.e. is it okay to send a wallpaper or border with messages; address their boss in an e-mail as "Hey Jessica"; or forward one of the ubiquitous mass e-mails or YouTube videos to a few co-workers? Unless shown or told otherwise, many new hires may assume that although the scenery has changed, their freedom to spontaneously express themselves hasn't.

Using E-mail at Work

One college student interning at a branch of an investment firm in a small town was called by the company's corporate office more than a hundred miles

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10 Tips for Successful E-mailing in the Professional Setting

- Carefully read e-mail and answer all questions, to avoid going back and forth.
- Avoid sending confidential information via e-mail—make a phone call or ask to discuss sensitive issues in person.
- Don't use text message or chat jargon (such as "BTW") unless it is widely used within your organization.
- Include a brief greeting that is appropriate for status of sender ("Hey Lori" may be fine for a friend but not for a supervisor). Also include a closing ("Thanks," or "Best Wishes, John").
- Watch the tone—remember no body language can be interpreted, only your words.
- Use spell check and read message for errors before sending.
- Respond promptly; if you cannot respond at the time, indicate that you will do so later.
- Use proper color, fonts, layout, and formatting (ones that fit with your work environment).
- Avoid "casual speak" or slang; use abbreviations and emoticons wisely.
- If you e-mail back and forth three times, and the problem is not resolved, pick up the phone.

away and reprimanded for logging on to his college e-mail account only an hour earlier. For many new to the scene of corporate employment, the fact that their online activity may be scrutinized by sophisticated software programs is often a rude awakening to the harsh reality that unacceptable behavior can result in termination. An example of this occurred when a nuclear plant on the West Coast terminated a newly hired engineer after he had already received one warning for using his work e-mail account to run a part-time business during working hours.

Following are many employers' top e-mail pet peeves in the professional setting:

- MESSAGES IN ALL CAPS
- messages in all lower case
- Incorrect, punctuation
- Responding messages that don't answer the question
- Writing the Great American Novel (e-mails that are too long)
- Sending unnecessarily large attachments
- Forwarding non-work related jokes or chain e-mails
- Discussing personally sensitive issue
- Forwarding offensive or off-color jokes or attachments

- Not using the subject line—or not changing it to agree with the topic.

Social Communicating At Work

Further highlighting Generation Y's reliance on electronic devices is the frequent use of MP3 players, personal cell phones, and text messaging as a means of social communication. New hires may not realize that when the boss texts during a meeting it usually is for business purposes and that many of his cell phone calls are work-related. Having grown up in a "headphone culture," where they have been free to listen to music almost everywhere except in the classroom, they can be unaware of their employer's expectations to "tune *into*" their environment to be available to those around them.

And, these issues are global: Management in a law firm in the United Kingdom said the use of MP3 players created an environment where staff members were not communicating with each other. Senior management felt the use of MP3 players would "have a negative impact on the business." However, it is possible that the younger employees felt that listening to music

was a way they could inject work-life balance into their workday and bring more enjoyment to their job.[2]

Suggestions for using cell phones and MP3 players in the workplace include:

- Use may be restricted to breaks—know your company's policies.
- Select a ringtone that is appropriate for your work environment.
- When talking on a cell phone, speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Record a professional greeting, not "What's up? This is Todd."
- Stand apart from others when speaking so as not to interfere with others' work or conversation.
- Avoid discussing personal issues on a cell phone when co-workers can easily overhear you. Keep your cell phone strictly as an accessory, avoid laying it down on a desk or table in front of co-workers or clients (have a holder or special place for it).
- Turn it off when in meetings; even a vibrating cell phone can be distracting.
- Do not text during a meeting unless it relates to the topic at hand.
- Check text messaging for spelling and grammar before sending.
- Think twice before taking photos with your phone camera; doing so may be against company policy.

Corporate Culture Includes Technology

The challenge for career services professionals and recruiters is preparing this technically savvy Generation Y to enter the workplace and advising them that work environments vary greatly according to industry, company culture, and the nature of the job itself. Organizations need to define their own expectations of professionalism as pertaining to their use of technical or electronic devices in the workplace and then formalize policies that govern such hot issues as information security and personal use of electronic devices on the job. Often, the first step in this process is training within the hiring organization, either

E-mail: Use of Subject Line, CC, BCC, FW, and So On...

- Write a short and direct subject line—it is the "hook" to getting the message read.
- Take off "FW" from the subject line if the message has been forwarded.
- Modify the subject line to fit the topic if it has changed.
- Do not share others' e-mail addresses unnecessarily (use a distribution list or blind cc).
- Use "reply all" judiciously; do they all really need to know?
- Avoid overusing "urgent" and "important" (remember the boy who cried wolf?).
- Save "read receipt" for crucial messages—would you request a receipt for every phone call?
- Do not forward others' messages without their permission.

Helpful Web Sites

- www.emailreplies.com
- www.netmanners.com
- http://careerplanning.about.com/od/communication/a/email_etiquette.htm

with an assigned mentor who shares information and models acceptable behavior, or through a formal training program. These programs often use online and/or corporate trainers who instruct new hires on company policy and expose them to an environment where they learn other unwritten rules governing office behavior.

At the college level, career services professionals often work closely with students in providing information on surviving the transition to corporate culture, whether for an internship or full-time employment. Since this is often the first time students learn about possible policies and procedures in the workplace, its importance should be emphasized. Consequently, it may be most beneficial for students to hear about workplace rules governing the use of technology from someone who has firsthand experience, such as a young alumnus or a human resource professional.

General Rules of Thumb For New Employees

Career services practitioners cannot know every employer's policies, but there are some guidelines students and new graduates should be aware of when going into the workplace. These guidelines include:

- Know your company's policy regarding the use of electronic devices in the workplace; if these policies were not shared, look on the company's web site—if not available, request the information.
- Understand that your company has the right to monitor your use of e-mail and may terminate you if you do not adhere to its policies.

- Beware of a false sense of security before sending an e-mail; ask yourself if you would mind if your message was sent to the *world*. Remember you have *no* control where your message goes after you click send.
- Certain sites can be off-limits; understand what these are. If you accidently log onto one of them immediately report it to your information security officer or IT department.
- Downloading of some programs can be prohibited (RealPlayer, freeware, shareware, games, and so on); find out what these are.
- It is often against company policy to use office technology for commercial or personal use; set up a separate e-mail address for these purposes.
- If policies prohibit the personal use of the Internet during work hours, limit your use to breaks or lunch hours.
- If company guidelines permit a "reasonable use" for personal reasons, let your friends and family know of this restriction and ask them to respect this privilege.

Conclusion

Although more organizations are developing policies, many rules regarding the use of electronic communication devices in the workplace remain unwritten. More efforts need to be made to formalize these policies so that college students and new hires understand that the concept of business etiquette or professionalism has expanded in the last few years and will continue to expand exponentially as new technology is developed. Colleges should provide

training on these expectations in the workplace, not only teaching networking and dining etiquette, but also how to use e-mail effectively to communicate with bosses or co-workers.

Using some of the preferred methods of communication of Millennials, such as text messaging, is an excellent way of training or introducing students, new grads, or new hires to evolving concepts of professionalism and e-etiquette in the workplace. As technology is advancing at a rapid rate, career services needs to continue to develop new ways to channel the technical skills of this generation, and help them become contributing members of society.

Endnotes

[1] "More students use social networking sites," *Bulletin News*, University of St. Thomas. www.stthomas.edu/bulletin/news/200849/Wednesday/WebWednesday12_3_08.cfm

[2] "Employers warned of staff 'tuning out of workplace,'" Starting Up News. www.startups.co.uk/6678842911308648337/employers-warned-of-staff-tuning-out-of-workplace.html

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