

# A to Z

## Business Etiquette Guide

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Specialized Administrative Staffing

*A Robert Half International Company*

## Etiquette tips from “Attire” to “Zeal”

Whether you realize it or not, people pay attention to etiquette, from how you treat a member of a restaurant’s wait staff to your approach when meeting someone for the first time. These rules govern our behavior, from the seemingly benign (what to wear) to the more complex (managing office negativity). It is assumed, rightly or wrongly, that polished manners translate to polished work. Make your manners shine by following the simple rules contained in this guide.



### Attire

“It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.” – Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

- If your company has no written dress policy, pay particular attention to “unofficial” dress codes by observing what your supervisor and other managers within your company are wearing.
- Even if you know your company’s dress code is casual, make sure you are dressed on the higher end of the scale. When in doubt, it is better to be too formal than too casual.
- The classic “uniform” for women is a two-piece suit: a jacket paired with either pants or a skirt. Wool-blend suits in conservative colors, such as navy, gray, beige or brown, look best. Shoes with conservative heels, like closed-toed pumps in leather or fabric, also are a safe bet.
- Men, like women, should wear navy, gray, brown or beige suits in natural fibers. Alternatively, they can wear a conservative sports coat with a light colored shirt and pressed slacks. Dark shoes and socks are a must.



### Balance

“We come into this world head first and go out feet first; in between, it is all a matter of balance.” – Paul Boese

- Balancing professional and personal obligations is tricky, especially when working with large groups of people. If you telecommute or have a flexible or compressed schedule, be sure to communicate your work hours to your coworkers. Stick to your schedule as best you can so you don’t find yourself answering e-mails or calls during your “off” hours or vacation. Otherwise, you run the risk of burning out.
- Conversely, be respectful of others’ schedules. Avoid contacting coworkers during “off” hours or while they’re on vacation unless it’s urgent. If you need to get in touch with someone regarding several issues or requests, bundle your queries and send them all at once so your colleague isn’t interrupted multiple times.



### Cell Phones

“This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.” – Western Union internal memo, 1876

- This may seem obvious, but the point is often overlooked: During business meetings, turn off the ringer of your cell phone and let voice mail answer any calls.
- If you’re in your car or a bustling building, be mindful of background noise. If you’re doing more listening than talking, put your phone on mute.



### Dining

“You can tell a lot about a fellow’s character by his way of eating jellybeans.” – Ronald Reagan

- Steer clear of unshucked oysters, crab legs, ribs, fish with tiny bones and other potentially messy foods. The only thing that should make a splash is you, not the marinara.
- Your table setting could include up to three forks, three spoons, two knives, two plates and multiple glasses. Know which utensil or plate is yours (food plates to the left, beverages to the right), and follow your place setting for cues on which utensil should be used for each course. Work from the outside in – the salad fork is to the left of the one for the entrée, for example.



## E-mail

"When it comes to the mail, I feel it is better to receive than to give." – Joseph Epstein

- Use the same rules of punctuation and capitalization you would in a letter.
- Your e-mail address is just as important as the body of your message in conveying professionalism. Anything cutesy or off-color is inappropriate for business.
- Use the subject field to describe the content of your message. As your e-mail string becomes longer and more topics are discussed, consider changing the subject line to reflect the new discussion points.
- Be judicious when using "reply all," or copying and blind copying others on messages. Make sure those who receive your e-mail really do need it.



## First Impressions

"We rarely forget that which has made a deep impression on our minds." – Tryon Edwards

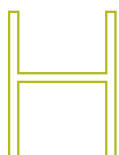
- Communicate with your whole body: Stand when someone enters the room, make eye contact, smile and shake the person's hand firmly, but without crushing his or her fingers.
- Create a 30-second synopsis of who you are and what you do. A memorable, snappy sound byte will keep your name and background top of mind long after you've left.
- Listen attentively, don't interrupt and don't monopolize the conversation.



## Gratitude

"Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others." – Cicero

- Don't overlook the power of appreciation. Everyone likes to be acknowledged for hard work or dedication to a business goal.
- Let your coworkers know they've done a good job – and do it sooner rather than later.
- Don't shower each person you encounter with excessive praise. Basing positive comments on specific actions will make it far more meaningful.



## Holiday Cards

"The manner of giving is worth more than the gift." – Pierre Corneille

- Avoid sending cards with religious messages.
- Consider sending a Thanksgiving or New Year's card – your message will stand out from the scores of other holiday notes. Link the occasion with your message – express how grateful you are for having such a great colleague or how you look forward to another year of working together.
- Always include a handwritten message for a personal touch.
- While time-consuming, it's worth it to address your envelopes by hand. Computer-printed labels are too impersonal.



## Introductions

"I always have trouble remembering three things: faces, names, and – I can't remember what the third thing is." – Fred Allen

- Wear your name tag near your right shoulder, not your left. When people shake your hand, their eyes will go directly to the tag, which will help them remember your name.
- When you're speaking to someone, and another person you know walks up, always make introductions.
- Offer a memorable piece of information when you make an introduction, which will also serve as a conversation starter. For example, "This is Karen, an administrative assistant for XYZ corporation. She was just elected president of her local IAAP chapter."



## Jokes

"A difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on affections." – George Eliot, Daniel Deronda

- Humor is tricky business in the workplace. No matter how well you know the other person, avoid off-color jokes; comments based on religion, gender, race or sexual preference; and snide or sarcastic remarks.
- Don't send or forward jokes via e-mail to business acquaintances. You might think something is a knee-slapper, but there's no guarantee your recipient will, too.
- Don't use jokes as a form of criticism.
- Defuse tension with humor. The levity will make everyone feel more at ease.



## Keeping Confidences

"Whoever gossips to you will gossip about you." – Spanish proverb

- When a colleague tells you something privately, assume he or she means it's for your ears only. If the person wants others to know, he or she will make that decision.
- Never reveal proprietary information about an employer to anyone, including personal friends and business contacts.
- Don't gossip about former colleagues to current or prospective ones – they'll wonder if you'll do the same about them.



## Listening

"There are people who, instead of listening to what is being said to them, are already listening to what they are going to say themselves." – Albert Guinon

- Listening means more than waiting for your turn to talk. Concentrate on the other person's words; don't let your mind wander. You may miss an important point and end up asking a question that's already been addressed.
- Resist the urge to jump into the conversation when someone pauses in thought. He or she might be searching for words, not inviting a new comment. Wait a beat or two and then respond.



## Meetings

"Talk of nothing but business, and dispatch that business quickly." – Aldus Manutius (1449–1515),  
Placard on the door of the Aldine Press

- You wouldn't speak to your boss unprepared, and you shouldn't go into a meeting cold, either. Ask attendees for topics of discussion and review the agenda beforehand.
- Specify an ending time so others can plan their schedules accordingly. If it looks like you've got too much to cover, set aside the last five minutes to schedule a follow-up meeting.
- Resist the urge to over-invite. Make sure every person attending has expertise on the subject or will be affected by the topic of discussion.



## Negativity

"I let negativity roll off me like water off a duck's back. If it's not positive, I didn't hear it." – George Foreman

- Negativity is like a virus – it spreads. Denial of an obvious problem isn't productive; it's far better to identify what's wrong and collaborate on a solution.
- News shared by gossip is often more bad than good. It might be tempting to talk about the latest personal goings-on of your coworker; however, it's best to leave that information to him or her to share. Gossip can be like a game of telephone: No matter how accurate information is at the beginning, it changes as it travels.



## Office Politics

"Politics is a blood sport." – Aneurin Bevan

- Pay attention to political undercurrents, which may help you navigate tricky situations, but avoid becoming directly involved in office politics.
- Watch out for the overly ambitious, who might do whatever it takes to advance their careers, even if it means saying unkind or untrue things about another coworker.
- Maintain cordial but professional relationships with your superiors and coworkers. Don't share intimate details about your personal life – a little distance is healthy.



## Public Speaking

"Lead the audience by the nose to the thought." – Laurence Olivier

- Even the most seasoned performers rehearse their acts before showtime. To uncover potential glitches, do the same using as many variables as possible, including microphone, PowerPoint file and projector.
- The day of your presentation, provide clear visuals and handouts of key points. Information presented both visually and verbally will be retained more easily.
- Follow the Golden Rule: Present unto others as you would like others to present unto you. Speak clearly and audibly, don't exceed the time limit and allow sufficient time for questions.



## Quitting

"When work is a pleasure, life is joy! When work is a duty, life is slavery." – Maxim Gorky, *The Lower Depths*

- Give at least two weeks' notice, or more if it will take additional time to train your replacement. Be prepared, however, to be asked to leave that day if your company prefers to transition new roles more quickly.
- Plan your departure so it's a smooth transition for those who remain. Create documents to inform your manager on the status of each of your projects and provide an outline of next steps needed to advance their progress.
- Leave on the best possible terms. Avoid expressing anger to your boss or coworkers – you might need them as references down the line.
- Don't use the exit interview as a forum for venting pent-up frustrations or seeking revenge, but do offer honest, constructive feedback.



## R.S.V.P.

"Consideration for others is the basis of a good life, a good society." – Confucius

- When R.S.V.P. is printed on an invitation, you must contact the event host or sponsor to either accept or decline. Correct head counts allow the host to accurately account for food, seating, handouts and the like.
- Too many people confuse R.S.V.P. with "regrets only," which means just that – call only if you cannot attend.
- Do your best to respond by the date specified on the invitation. Avoid putting it off until the last minute – it will look as if you were waiting for a better offer to come along.

# S

## Speakerphones

"Well, are you there?" – Greeting of telephone operators before 1895

- Always ask permission before placing a caller on speakerphone. Never put someone on if he or she is unaware that others can hear the conversation.
- At the beginning of a conference call, introduce all participants, including those who might be in the room but not speaking. This isn't just etiquette; failing to do so could have legal consequences.
- Unless your voice is familiar to all participants, introduce yourself each time you speak.
- Avoid putting someone on speakerphone unless it's a conference call.

# T

## Telephone Manners

"I've suffered from all of the hang-ups known, and none is as bad as the telephone." – Richard Armour

- When you call someone, always ask if he or she has time to speak to you before launching into the subject at hand.
- Always ask if it's OK – and wait for an answer – before putting someone on hold.
- When leaving a voice-mail message, clearly state your name (spell it if you've never spoken to the person before), phone number, company, date and reason for your call. Repeat your name and number at the end of the message.
- Your voice-mail greeting should contain your name, company name and extension, and the assurance that you'll return calls promptly. Try to return messages within 24 hours.

# U

## Utensils

"The more he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons." – Ralph Waldo Emerson

- A good rule of thumb is to work from the outside in, starting with the first course. For example, your salad fork is on the far left of your plate; the one to use with your entrée is to its right. Dessert utensils get top billing above your plate.
- Put used silverware on your plate, not directly on the tablecloth.
- When finished eating, place your knife and fork across your plate, pointing at 11 o'clock.

# V

## Vacation Planning

"Vacation used to be a luxury, however, in today's world, it has become a necessity." – Unknown

- Leave your desk clean and well organized (and make sure your team knows where to find important documents and files).
- You don't need to tell people where you're going, but you do need to let them know you'll be gone. Update your voice-mail and out-of-office e-mail message, and be sure to include an alternate point of contact for immediate requests.
- Avoid skipping out when major projects are reaching their peak. And check with your coworkers so you're not all out at the same time, especially during prime vacation periods, like summer and the winter holidays.

# W

## Writing

"The strokes of the pen need deliberation as much as the sword needs swiftness." – Julia Ward Howe

- Be careful what you put in writing. You don't want anything coming back to haunt you. If you need to convey confidential or sensitive information and you do not want wandering eyes to see it, it's best to speak with the person directly.
- Always proofread carefully. Spelling and grammatical errors reflect poorly on your attention to detail.
- Never underestimate the value of putting pen to paper. When expressing appreciation, gratitude or sympathy, a handwritten card is more thoughtful than a quickly scribed e-mail.



## Xerography

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted." – Aesop, The Lion and the Mouse

- If you have a lengthy copy job that will tie up the machine for more than a minute or two, let your coworkers know so they can plan accordingly.
- If you use the last sheet of paper, refill the tray. The same goes for toner – replace the cartridge if it's running low.
- Don't walk away from a paper jam you've caused, pretending it was "already like that." Get help if you cannot fix it yourself.



## Year-end Gift Giving

"The excellence of a gift lies in its appropriateness rather than in its value." – Charles Dudley Warner, Eleventh Study

- While giving small holiday gifts to your colleagues and manager is a nice gesture, it's not required. Most supervisors, in fact, do not expect presents from their direct reports, so there's no need to reciprocate if your manager delivers a holiday gift. A simple thank-you note will suffice.
- If you're unsure of a recipient's tastes, consider giving a gift card to a coffeehouse, bookstore or other general-interest store.
- Consider a gift that keeps on giving. Make a contribution to your colleague's favorite charity on his or her behalf. You will support a worthwhile cause while showing appreciation for your coworker.
- Because many people have dietary restrictions, be careful with gifts of food – a diabetic won't be able to enjoy a box of chocolates, for example.



## Zeal

"Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Circles

- If you show genuine excitement about your job, people will enjoy working with or for you, making for a pleasant, productive business environment.
- Let your enthusiasm show in your facial expressions (alert eyes, relaxed smile), your words (warm, friendly greetings) and your overall style (cooperative, positive, upbeat).
- Passion for your work can translate into a compelling image – you'll be perceived as a confident, competent, talented professional.

## About OfficeTeam

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