

IDEAS

5 things every modern graduate should know about workplace etiquette

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Photo: The Intern/ IMDb.

Every generation rewrites certain rules of behaviour.

The latest generation of graduates entering the workplace has grown up connected to mobile devices and social media as if they were extensions of their own limbs. The rules for how we communicate are being redefined.

Adjusting these new workers into the routines and structures of a corporate role can prove difficult, and even cost employers revenue or staff career opportunities.

But the greatest impact is on businesses is communication with clients, where there is the risk of losing and other commercial opportunities.

As a result, business etiquette experts are increasingly being sought after as they try to teach graduates the skills they failed to learn at school or university.

One professional development company, PD Training, says demand by employers for business etiquette courses has rocketed in the past two years from putting 12 companies through the courses in 2013, to 30 this year.

“[Often] organisations get graduates in and they find that graduate treats the workplace like they treated their school or university environment, and it’s not professional,” says CEO Paul Findlay, who has been a etiquette coach for ten years.

According to Findlay, there are many behaviours graduates are unknowingly displaying in the workplace which colleagues find offensive.

“Graduates come in and they might pinch a pen off someones desk, or someone’s stapler, and they don’t realise it’s other peoples resources that they’ve had provided to them so that they can do their job effectively and efficiently.”

He said the same goes for other areas of etiquette.

“They might come in and have a big tuna sandwich, or don’t clean up after themselves, and take their shoes off under their desk. There’s all sorts of things that are just demonstrating a casual-ness that isn’t professional in a work environment.”



This is probably not appropriate for a work lunch. Photo: Eli Duke/ Flickr.

As well as the increase in interaction with social media, there’s one thing in particular where graduates are learning these behaviours from: school.

“As schools have been modernising, there has been a lot more casualness around the way students an teachers interact,” he explains. “This results in great mentoring systems.... They’re providing a nurturing stewardship, supporting the kids in a way that helps them learn and be more free to express themselves... which is wonderful, but it then it also sets up an expectation that when they go to uni, you can treat people and superiors more like peers. And if you find yourself in a corporate environment it doesn’t work that way.”

Findlay told Business Insider five of the most important ways graduates can get up to speed with the needs of their employers. Here they are.

Use your inside voice

“They have to know the difference between an inside voice and outside voice,” he says.

“You find that the ones speaking on the phone loudly or talking about their escapades on the weekends are the younger ones, which creates a bit of disharmony.”

Be present, and not just physically

There are a lot of problems with graduates “coming in to meetings and sitting there responding to social media... with the constant pings and notifications going off,” Findlay says.

Also, ditch the headphones.

Schools allowing kids to study while listening to music is creating a norm that is not acceptable at work, says Findlay.

“Technology is an extension of younger people’s lives in a way that it isn’t for the rest of the world force,” he says, adding that they need to understand when it is appropriate to use your mobile and when it is not.

“Don’t take calls in the middle of a business meeting. If you must, excuse yourself and give a brief reason why you are taking the call. Adhere to the 10 feet away rule and don’t take calls in intimate spaces.”

Get used to face-to-face communication on sensitive topics

He says the way graduates have grown up with technology has changed the way they communicate one-on-one with others.

“Especially when it’s hard or an awkward conversation”, people tend to rely on using their devices to communicate, said Findlay.

“You can’t do that in workplace. It’s really important that you’re involved in constructive feedback or something that needs reasoning or depth.

“People are finding that (transition) very challenging.

“Often younger people say one thing online, and another thing in person. And for people that know you well, they know that what you say is for effect online and that’s not what you actually think or mean... that’s a part of your online persona.”

The problem with this is that they are then bringing that persona into the workplace and “stirring the pot”.

BTW, easy on the LOLs. And emojis

“Emoticons, whilst they’re unprofessional, often times they can help avoid miscommunications that can happen in writing. Even in email now you’re prompted to use them... using them can overcome a brief or abrupt message by adding tone.”

In a casual setting he said an emoji can be more well-received than shortened English – which he says is always big no-no.

“Leave text speak – LOL and BTW – for your mates.”

Overall he says they’re a “double-edged sword”.

“Avoid emoticons unless your business relationship is already built.”

Be courteous and aware

All-in-all Findlay’s advice for graduates fresh into the corporate is to just be aware of others, and act courteous.

“A lot of the time it’s just plain manners and consideration for the people around you,” he says, “a work environment is supposed to be respectful and professional”.

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