Workplace e-Etiquette

by Meg Langland

Accustomed to texting during class? Do you check your Facebook page throughout the day? Send tweets to your followers? If you're about to enter the world of work, expect your communication habits to undergo a radical change.

In the workplace, you will be expected to comply with rules and policies governing personal use of the Internet and electronic devices. During working hours, your use of technology will be company-centered and more controlled than what you're used to now. That might be hard for you to fathom, especially if, like many new grads, you're used to swapping flash drives, sharing passwords with close friends, and leaving your computer unlocked. 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.

DON'T STAND ON THE CAP KEY

Unfortunately, there are many mistakes you can make in e-mail, but these are many employers' pet peeves when it comes to e-mail in the workplace:

- MESSAGES IN ALL CAPS
- messages in all lower case
- Incorrect, punctuation
- Using "text speak"; i.e., "Thx 4 meeting. Talk to u l8r"
- Responding messages that don't answer the question
- Writing the "Great American Novel" (e-mails that are too long)
- Sending unnecessarily large attachments
- Overusing the "cc" and "blind cc" functions
- Forwarding jokes, chain e-mails, or offensive material
- Discussing personally sensitive issues
- Not using the subject line — or not changing it to agree with the topic

Each Organization Sets Its Own Rules Work environments vary greatly according to industry, company culture, and the nature of the job itself. Each organization has its own expectations for what it deems "professional" behavior, and each has its own set of policies governing such issues as information security and personal use of electronic devices on the job.

Often, you'll find out about formal policies during training, but there are also "unwritten rules" that you'll need to learn. If you run afoul of company rules, you could end up out of a job. For many new to the work world, the fact that their online activity may be monitored is a rude awakening. For example, one college student interning at a branch of an investment firm in a small town received a call from the company's corporate office more than a hundred miles away and was reprimanded for logging on to his college e-mail account an hour earlier. You might be surprised that a newly hired engineer was fired after disregarding a warning and using his work e-mail account to run a part-time business during working hours. The point is, know the rules and stick to them.

"Hey Jessica" and Other Land Mines

Just as there are rules governing your personal communications on the job, you'll find there are rules governing your professional communications. Is it okay to address the boss in e-mail as "Hey Jessica"? What about using wallpaper on your e-mail? Should you forward a YouTube video to co-workers? Probably not. Your arrival in the workplace signals more than just a change in scenery. Your freedom to spontaneously express yourself has changed, too. Proceed with caution.

General Rules of Thumb For New Employees

- Learn your company's policy regarding the use of electronic devices in the workplace; if these policies are not shared, look on the company's website. If not available, request the information from your manager or the human resources department.
- 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. Your "Internet history" may be subject to periodic review.
- 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 websites can be off limits; understand what these are. If you accidently log onto one of them, immediately log off and report it to your information security officer or IT department.
- Downloading 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, lunch hours, or from your own home.
- 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.
- Reply to work-related e-mails in a timely manner; if you can't respond in full, thank the sender and let him/her know you will address this issue within a certain time frame.
- Be wise about what you post on online social networking sites; remember you are now an employee and not only representing yourself but also an organization.