

Crabby's etiquette guide for working ladies and gentlemen



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Crabby Office Lady

There are certain civilized ways of treating each other that years of evolution have encouraged us to realize. Still, some of us seem to have forgotten our manners.

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A while back I wrote a column about [e-mail etiquette](#). Since many of us spend a lot of time in e-mail (more time than we really should, probably), this particular column has become one of my more popular ones. And while I still get e-mail messages that are written IN ALL CAPITAL LETTERS and still others with a blank subject line (*heavy sigh*), there isn't much I can do about that.

That said, you and I both know there is more to workplace etiquette than just e-mail manners. Of course, since I am the Crabby Office Lady, you may think that manners are not my specialty, and, to be honest, they're not. And so, you and I may want to consider cleaning up our act a bit at work and start cultivating a better overall image for ourselves.

So let me give this general workplace courtesy thing a go and see if anything sticks.

Gossip: Remember what you learned in junior high

Get folks together, and gossip will happen. Perhaps it's just part of our nature, or perhaps, for some folks, it makes them feel better about themselves to talk smack about other folks.

If you're going to talk about someone, you need to realize that the chances of your words getting back to that person are pretty good, and gossip often finds a way to come back to bite you at a most inopportune time: You repeat a rumor you've heard about Erica to Mona; Mona repeats it to Phil; Phil makes a beeline for Kitty's office; Kitty, who's been looking for just the right opportunity to get on Erica's good side, spills it. And Erica (being the resourceful schemer she is) finds out, in about two minutes, who set this unsubstantiated (but completely true) rumor free: you.

But, as human beings, some of us believe that we do have free will and can make the choice not to be sneaky and mean at work. So, let me make this short and sweet, my children: Don't gossip. It makes everyone — especially you — look bad.

Meetings: Not every corner is a conference room

There are meetings and there are "meetings." Some are formal meetings that involve an e-mail invitation, an agenda, and a taker of minutes. And then there are the non-meetingish meetings, like when you run into someone in the hallway, the restroom, the cafeteria.

I know that hallway meetings can be useful and, by their very nature, inescapable. But please, if you have something to discuss that is sensitive or personal, take it to an office with a closed door. Hallways are for walking. If you're getting into a discussion that might require more than a couple of minutes or inspire emphatic waving of hands (and the accompanying danger to passers-by), make your way to a less-trafficked spot. Also, don't force innocent hallway walkers into a game of "London Bridge," making them walk between you. Move off to the side and let them pass.

Take only pictures, steal only time, leave only footprints.

Yes, you can steal time, and turns out you can steal a lot of things; stealing has a broad definition. But I'm not talking about breaking into someone's house or shoplifting Preparation H® (one of the most shoplifted items, turns out). Just to set the record straight, the following acts are considered stealing in the workplace:

- Parking in the accessible parking space.
- Taking home a ream of paper, or a couple of those new chairs from the lobby.
- Taking credit for work done by others.

You get the idea. If it feels wrong, it probably is. If it feels right with a sneaky, I'm-getting-away-with-it feel to it (as in taking the lunch that doesn't belong to you from the group fridge), it's also probably wrong.

"If the phone doesn't ring, it's me..." (Jimmy Buffet)

Ah yes, the standard in every office is still...the telephone. And while cell phones, instant messaging, and e-mail have encouraged us to loosen our ties when it comes to non-face-to-face communication, there are still some courtesies worth keeping:

- Answer your phone nicely. Identify who you are. "Um...yello...?" is just not an appropriate way to answer the phone at work.
- If you have to put someone on hold, ask first. Don't just say, "Hold, please," and shut them off. "Please" is not a get-out-of-jail-free card (even my six-year-old daughter knows that). That being said, I do realize that some of you reading this may work at a busy switchboard and can't coddle every Tom, Dick, or "do-you-have-Prince-Albert-in-a-can" jokester who calls up. But you get my point.
- If you have an office with a door, close the door if you're going to have a conversation that is long and/or personal. We all have a lot of things to do, and hearing only one side of your conversation is always maddeningly intriguing.
- If we can, let's avoid having a long, private conversation on speaker phone. When I'm trying to be personal and *private* (that's the key word here) and you're broadcasting it to the world, that tells me something about the level of trust between us.
- When you're in the process of leaving a voice mail, don't be reading your e-mail, applying your makeup, or trying to catch the attention of someone passing by your office. (You're not as good at multi-tasking as you think you are. Do you really want recorded proof?)

I have my own serious list of cell phone pet peeves, but that is another column for another day...

Communal spaces: Just part of office life

Unless you're a full-time telecommuter, you probably share some measure of space with other people in your office. This could mean an office, restroom, kitchen, cafeteria, copy room, conference room, or all of the above. So please:

- Don't take the last cup of coffee without making more.
- Never say anything — out loud, in an instant message, or in e-mail — that you would not want someone else to know.
- Related to the item above, if you're sharing an office, keep your private conversations with Snookums to a minimum. There's no need to gross out your office-mate.
- Regarding bathroom conversations, you never know who is in the stall next to you or how your voice echoes into the other gender's bathroom or other offices.

Socializing: A little can go a long way

When I asked a cohort of mine about his views on socializing with coworkers, he told me a long-winded story that involved a business trip, a casino, a hotel room, and a WHOLE lot of 'splainin' to do when he got home. While I'll spare you the details here, believe me when I tell you these three things:

1. Even if your coworkers have their ties loosened and their hair unpinned, this doesn't mean that you are all free to act as though you are taking part in a fraternity hazing ritual. You are still representing the company you work for (as are your coworkers).
2. Watch the alcohol consumption (see the section about gossip, above).
3. Be true to the expense report (see abbreviated naughty story, above).

Look, I'm not telling you not to have a good time. But these are not your best friends; these are people you work with, and while it can be quite refreshing to see the Crabby Office Lady let loose a bit, this doesn't mean you can just say — or do — anything you want to her. She has a direct line to Human Resources and will have your hungover rear back on the street by Monday 8 a.m..

Watch your language

Yes, we've all had both the 1) urge and 2) opportunity to use words that would make the longshoremen here on the wharves of the Puget Sound blush. However, consider this to be a subset of the "socializing" guideline above: Just because you're feeling a little free, frustrated, or freaked out doesn't mean you have the right to spew curse words, epithets, or other antisocial language at work.

Even if you're tempted to do this around people you've worked with for years and years, try to hold back. You'll risk embarrassing both yourself and the others, and you may even develop a reputation as a <gasp> potty-mouth.

Instant messaging, instant annoyance

Ah, instant messages: the blessing and the curse of our modern age. While this technology can really speed up communication between team members, it can also be a constant source of non-stop, pop-up irritation.

If you and your coworkers are going to make use of instant messaging, be sure to set some ground rules first. Some things you may want to think about:

- Do you say "Hi, are you there?" before launching into the message, or do you just launch right into the reason you're there?

NOTE Those are the two dominant schools of thought about the most courteous IM greeting. One person I talked to said to say "hi" before launching into whatever it is that can't wait. Another said just the opposite: IM'ing indicates "instant," so don't waste time with a greeting. Just get to the point and that's that. I can see both points of view, actually. I guess it just depends on your working style and how you (and your coworkers) use IM.

- Save sensitive conversations for face-to-face meetings. As I stated in my e-mail etiquette column, humans have emotions, not emoticons 😞.

Again, instant messaging can be really useful, but unless you set some boundaries, you may spend your days hopping between 10 different message windows and deciphering cutesy emoticons.

Dress code

As you may know, the dress code (generally speaking) where I work, on the Microsoft campus in Redmond, is pretty lax. Only two excuses for a suit around here: 1) you've got an interview, or 2) you're in sales.

However, this doesn't mean that anyone has free rein to come to work in cut-offs and stinky sweat socks. Between you and me, I've even seen more of my coworkers' bare feet in the summertime than is necessary (or even right).

When I went out into the working world for the first time, my mom and dad always told me to dress for success. While, at that point in history, "success" meant pantyhose and bunion-producing shoes, the basic tenet still holds true: If you want to be taken seriously, dress the part. I can't offer a specific way to dress if your company is all about being casual, but let me cast my net wide here:

- Wear shoes.
- Take showers regularly.

- Don't wear anything that is ripped, torn, or belongs to Rip Torn (sorry; couldn't resist).

"To have respect for ourselves guides our morals; and to have a deference for others governs our manners." — Laurence Sterne

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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