

By Calvin Sun

We spend one-third of our working lives at the office. The people we work with can affect our productivity and our careers, and vice versa. Practicing office etiquette makes the place and the workday just a bit more bearable.

1 Watch the volume of your voice

Keep your voice at a reasonable level. Other people are trying to work, and your voice may distract them. Besides, do you really want them to overhear what you're saying? If you have something personal or otherwise sensitive to discuss, consider doing it in a private office or conference room.

2 Use speakerphones with care

If you're on hold and waiting for someone to pick up, then yes, a speakerphone can save you time. Just keep the volume as low as possible. On the other hand, if you're planning to have a regular conversation with the other person, do it behind closed doors. Your co-workers in the area will not appreciate your disturbing them with a conference call.

3 Be sensitive about what you bring for lunch

We're supposed to be inclusive and accepting of people from different backgrounds and cultures, I know. And those other people are supposed to behave likewise. Nonetheless, be aware of how others may react to the lunch you bring. If you think about it, any reaction it causes can't be good for you. They'll either hate the smell and complain about you, or they'll love the smell, assassinate you, and eat your lunch. Either way, you lose out. If you have food with a distinctive aroma, consider either eating it outside or in the lunchroom, rather than at your desk. And some foods probably shouldn't be brought in at all, even to the lunchroom, such as [stinky tofu](#) or [durian](#).

4 Respect people's privacy

Because you're most likely in a cubicle or other open office area, you inevitably will overhear snippets of conversations other people are having. Maybe you'll hear something about a project you're involved with or a problem you've encountered before, and you believe you have something to contribute. Yes, if you go over and join the conversation, you could save the day or provide valuable insight. However, you might also be viewed as a busybody.

Think carefully before joining that conversation. One consideration might be the amount of desperation you sense in their voices. The more desperate, the more willing they might be to hear from others.

If you do choose to join them, I suggest you go to their office or cubicle, let them see you as you're listening to them. Then, at a break, casually mention that it sounds like there is a problem, and that if you can help, you'd be happy to. This approach is better than rushing over and telling them you overheard their conversation.

5 Fix, or attempt to fix, what you break

How many times have you gone to the photocopier to find that it was either out of toner, out of paper, or experiencing a paper jam? The problem was still around when you arrived because the previous person did nothing about it and simply left the copier in its problem condition.

Don't be that person. If you can clear the paper jam safely and according to procedure, try to do so. Most photocopiers have diagrams to show you how. If you can't fix the jam or the other problem, leave a signed dated note describing the issue and what you are doing to fix it or have it fixed. Those actions could be a call to the maintenance vendor or to an administrative department. Your co-workers will appreciate your efforts, and signing your name to the note demonstrates your willingness to take ownership.

6 Keep the lunchroom clean

Neither the refrigerator nor the microwave should resemble the Queens Botanical Garden. If you spilled something in either place, clean it up. If you forgot to eat something from the refrigerator, and it's starting to mold, throw it out yourself. Don't leave it for someone else.

7 Be punctual for meetings

If you're an attendee, be on time. If you can't make a meeting or you're going to be late, let someone know. Don't arrive late and ask for a recap. Doing so wastes everyone else's time. If you're the one who's running the meeting, start it on time and resume it on time after a break. To do otherwise (for example, to start late to accommodate latecomers) is unfair to those who showed up on time and only encourages more lateness in the future.

8 Be careful about solicitations

Even if your company has no strict prohibition against solicitations (for example, selling candy for a child's sports team fundraiser), be careful about doing so. Your co-workers may not appreciate being put on the spot. If you do anything at all, the best approach is to display the merchandise in a central location, with a notice about the reason, and an envelope to receive checks or cash.

9 Avoid borrowing or lending

*The rich rule over the poor,
and the borrower is servant to the lender.*

We've heard, in the past few weeks, more than we want to about issues with borrowing and lending. Those issues still apply even at the office level, even between individuals. Any borrowing that occurs can jeopardize a relationship if the repayment is slow, late, less than expected, or nonexistent. No matter how small the amount, the lender may feel resentment. In fact, a small amount might cause resentment precisely because the lender feels embarrassed about asking about repayment.

Avoid borrowing or lending if you can. If you absolutely must borrow, write the lender an IOU with the amount and sign it. Then, pay it back as soon as you can.

10 Don't ask co-workers how to spell

Microsoft Word has a spell checker. Use it. Don't bother your co-workers with such questions. It hampers their productivity and lowers their opinion of you. Some probably won't even want to answer, because doing so makes them feel stupid. When I get such questions, my response is, "Wait a minute while I check the dictionary" or "Wait while I use the Word dictionary."

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