



Etiquette in the Open Office

Introduction

Every office has its own unique culture – specific ways of behaving and getting work done.

As workplaces become increasingly open, placing pressure on business cultures to change, it becomes important to think about establishing guidelines for workplace behavior that could mean the difference between a pleasant or frustrating work environment.



Defining the Issues

The most effective means of establishing guidelines and protocols for appropriate open office behavior is to involve employees in their creation and development. Conducting focus groups with a variety of employees from every level in the organization is one of the best ways to:

- Align the guidelines with corporate culture and policies
- Create employee buy-in and, therefore, compliance to the guidelines
- Define the most appropriate guidelines based upon current attitudes and behaviors

Hot Topics

The ultimate goal of establishing workplace guidelines for the open office is to promote a set of widely agreed upon behaviors and protocols that will foster maximum workplace productivity without stifling creativity or individual freedom. Here are some key issues that are common in the open office, followed by suggestions for creating guidelines to address them:

- Noise
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Distractions
- Clutter
- Odors

Noise

Most complaints about the open office center on “noise control.” When co-workers sit close together, it’s important for them to be aware of the people around them. Since sound carries easily in an open work environment, it may be helpful to create guidelines that build employee awareness of others, while reinforcing appropriate workplace behavior. Here’s an example of a guideline for controlling office noise:



“In an open environment, noise can carry. Remember to modulate your voice – people don’t always want to hear your conversations and phone calls.”

Privacy and Confidentiality

Limited levels of privacy are available in an open office environment, so confidential matters should be discussed in an alternative setting. The following guideline might be established to encourage a new kind of behavior:



“If you need to have a sensitive conversation, use the small conference rooms located throughout the space.”

Distractions

Speaker phones, radios, and ringing cell phones are just a few of the “culprits” causing distraction in the open office environment. Gathering input from workers concerning specific problems that interfere with their work is the first place to start in creating guidelines around this issue. One example might be:



“Just because others can hear you doesn’t mean they want to. Please refrain from using speaker phones in the open work areas. When listening to music, please wear headphones!”

Clutter

To help maintain a pleasant, productive work environment, it's important for all workspaces to be kept neat and organized. Books, binders and papers should not pile up in the office or workstation, nor should they be stored on top of filing cabinets and overheads.



“It’s a good practice to leave your desk and work area organized by filing and storing important documents and paper. This also assists with information security.”

Clutter

Mess and overload are not simply confined to individual work areas. Everyone needs to share the responsibility for a clean, productive work environment. To build awareness around this issue, a guideline might read as follows:



“In conference rooms, copy rooms, collaboration and break areas, be careful what you leave behind and take extra time to clean up after yourself.”

Odor Control

Too much cologne, aftershave, or perfume can give those nearby a headache. Add to that garlic, onions and other pungent foods and you may have a recipe for disaster. Odor control in the open office may need to be reinforced by clear protocols for behavior:



“Keep your desk and work area clean and free of trash and food. Use the commons area if you’ll be heating hot, particularly smelly food. It’s distracting for your co-workers to smell your lunch, especially if it’s not time for theirs.”

Next Steps

Businesses today represent a wide range of diverse, corporate cultures, making it difficult to suggest universal “dos” and “don’ts.” However, the best argument for attending to workplace etiquette is the desire to create an environment that allows people to do their best work. In order to accomplish this, companies can take the following steps:

- **Create** an employee task force or conduct focus groups with employees to clearly identify the issues. Employees should have input in defining the most appropriate guidelines
- **Enlist** cooperation by providing reasonable explanations that support the guidelines developed by the task force or focus groups
- **Publish.** Documentation can help clarify the issues and provide backup when needed
- **Use** the written document to orient new employees and help them to understand your corporate culture