

What the #@!\$%! Happened to Our Manners at Work?

Because of pandemic rust, a generational shift or something else, the working world is getting ruder, many say



OLEG BORODIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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By [Callum Borchers](#)

Workers, where are your bleeping manners?

You're [cursing more](#) and handshaking less, quitting on shorter notice and waiting longer to answer [emails and texts](#).

At least, that's how it feels to the self-appointed etiquette police among your co-workers and business associates. Politeness is tough to measure, and, sure, certain norms are overdue for updates. Still, I keep hearing from business people who swear (as in attest, not cuss) that the working world is getting ruder.

Hiring managers lament that job candidates [skip cover letters](#) whenever possible, seldom follow up on interviews with thank-you notes and [can't be counted on](#) to show up once they've accepted offers.

Job seekers, for their part, complain that computers screen those cover letters, anyway, and that too few recruiters are considerate enough to send rejection letters, leaving hopefuls to wonder for weeks about where they stand with potential employers.

Many workers, [particularly younger ones](#), claim they aren't interested in bonding with colleagues and act accordingly. Happy hour? Hard pass. That's not so much about being cold or uncivil, these people say, as it is about maintaining a private life away from work.

Others' interpersonal skills are rusty or underdeveloped, owing to limited opportunities to practice during much of the past couple of years.

One glimmer of hope, or a sign of self-awareness: LinkedIn reports August enrollment in its two most popular business etiquette courses was up 127% year over year.

Those mourning the supposed decline of business etiquette blame the pandemic, a tight labor market, Gen Z and the internet.

“In the last three or four years, it has become much, much worse,” says Steve Landrum, a sales executive who lives near Atlanta.

His No. 1 gripe is [“ghosting”](#) from potential clients, which he says is more common now than at any time in his 30-year career. Like a dating-app match who suddenly stops answering messages after flirting, some sales leads show initial interest only to cut off communication without explanation.

When that happens, Mr. Landrum sends a short “breakup” email—“I’m going to assume that you’ve gone in a different direction,” he writes—if only for his own sense of closure. He tells me those who aren’t courteous harm their own reputations, though he concedes that bad form doesn’t dog people as it once did.

The bigger shift in recent years might be that rudeness has become less costly.

Left your job abruptly? In this economy, there’s [bound to be another one](#) around the corner—for now, anyway—and companies [aren’t checking references](#) as often as they used to.

Underdressed for the big meeting? Let she who is without [stretchy Zoom pants](#) cast the first stone.

Ignored that question a co-worker asked you on Slack? In a hybrid workplace, you might never cross paths with the co-worker and have to suffer the awkward consequences. Or if you do, you can claim having turned off notifications accidentally.



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Just don’t try that excuse on Phoenix Normand, chief of staff at a tech company in California.

“Waiting all day to return a Slack inquiry is pretty much the most disrespectful thing you can do,” he says.

A close second: mucking up written communications with wayward punctuation, misspellings, abbreviations and emojis. If Mr. Normand sees a “your” that should be “you’re,” he’s gonna be, like, WTF? Amirite?

“The English language is being butchered to the point where it’s almost embarrassing,” he says.

He adds that workers often don’t realize their informality can land poorly, at least if someone like the 53-year-old Mr. Normand is on the receiving end. A recipient might conclude that the writer doesn’t know basic grammar and syntax or take offense. A sloppy email can inadvertently suggest that the person in the “to” field isn’t worth the time it takes to proofread.

Toni Purvis, founder of the School of Disruptive Etiquette in Washington, D.C., recommends erring on the side of formality in writing. It can be safer, she says, to buck traditional notions of “professional” appearance because many companies have come to realize that rules governing attire, hair, tattoos and other aspects of personal style [can marginalize certain workers](#).

Still, it remains important to consider how others perceive the way you present yourself, she adds.

For instance, the red suit that Ms. Purvis wore on her first day as an intern at an investment bank in the aughts sent the wrong message. In an industry with its own dull palette—banker gray—it looked as though she was trying to be the center of attention, she says.

The outfit was a hand-me-down, and Ms. Purvis was oblivious to the unofficial dress code because she was the first person in her family or circle of friends to enter the corporate world. Her school aims to help others who don’t grow up learning etiquette by osmosis avoid missteps.

Daniel Post Senning, author and spokesman at the Emily Post Institute, notes that many traditional standards can be traced to wealthy, white society in the Northeast. He agrees with Ms. Purvis that contemporary etiquette is evolving to be more inclusive.

“Being true to who you are and where you came from is an important part of being honest,” he says.

That doesn’t mean authenticity always goes over well.

Cole Wiser, the creative director at a marketing agency in Dallas, says addressing a client as “y’all” once prompted a private scolding by a manager who thought the term was too informal. Ever since, Mr. Wiser says, he’s been self-conscious about a contraction that’s just part of how he talks.

When he slipped a “y’all” into a video call with a client recently, he asked his LinkedIn network to weigh in. The advice ranged from use it to don’t use it to use it only with fellow Texans. “Read the room” was a popular tip.

The mixed feedback wasn’t especially helpful, but he posted thank-yous, anyway. It seemed like the proper thing to do.

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