

World Changers podcast

Season 3, Episode 3

Mind your manners: the new office etiquette

Elle Bradley-Cox – 00:08

Welcome to World Changers a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams and internal communicators can stay one step ahead. Now an increasingly large number of people are back in the office while others continue to collaborate virtually. So what virtual-first lessons can we adopt for hybrid working? You might be surprised it starts with etiquette.

Now everybody knows not to heat up fish in the office microwave or take the last biscuit, right? Because when we're all in one place, a code of etiquette arises. Yet in our virtual first worlds of work, we've had to learn these unwritten rules. For example, taking turns to shoulder the unsociable meeting times across time zones to adopt to asynchronous working.

Charlie Feasby – 00:49

We wanted to explore some common bugbears. So we asked our team, what's your number one workplace etiquette breach?

Sophie Grace – 00:56

So my number one, workplace etiquette breach has to be people who call you without any warning. I'm an over-thinker, so when that happens, my mind automatically goes to the worst case scenario. Even if someone is showing green on Teams always drop them a line first to say, 'Hey, do you have a minute to discuss X?' It just puts everyone's mind at ease.

Sarah-Anne Richards – 01:20

I'd say my number one pet peeve is rustling on microphones. So whether it's like paper or a bag or something like that, drives me crazy.

Richard Bibby – 01:29

My name is Richard Bibby, and I am the procurement and partnerships manager as well as planning the studio for scarlettabbott.

The first thing that comes to mind is stuff in Teams etiquette, which is obviously a bit more in the place that we talked about the moment because of hybrid working. And sometimes I think people can be a bit sneaky by, if they're working from home, not looking at messages. And you can see that they've seen the messages, and sometimes they can say they're out when they're not out and sneaking out. I think, you know, we've got quite bad at that, and I'm not suggesting that people do it deliberately. But it sometimes is a bit annoying when you want to speak to somebody and they're not available.

The other thing that really bugs me is when somebody doesn't ask you if you're available speak to and they just call you. And you might be in the middle of something. I think, if you're working from home, you know, it's difficult to see what that person is up to at any time. It does bug me a lot when people just think that I'm available just because, you know, they can't see that I'm working on something or sometimes I could be on a landline call and somebody's calling you on Teams, and they don't realise you're doing that and then it kind of makes you look bad.

Paige Lazonby – 02:33

Hi, I'm Paige and I'm the sales and marketing assistant at scarlettabbott.

I think my biggest office pet peeve is probably not getting replies to messages. Especially as someone who works from home, you rely on messaging people as a way to stay connected and ask them for help if you need them to assist on something that you're working on. And then if they don't reply to be like, 'Oh, well, you know, I'm a little bit busy right now, but I'll add it to my list.' You, kind

of, end up feeling like the needy partner do you know what I mean? When you're messaging them repeatedly to pester them about it, but you're not getting replies it can be a little bit, a little bit tricky.

Tony Beresford – 03:09

Tony Beresford, head of creative at scarlettabbott.

So my pet peeve in the workplace is quite a modern one – it's Teams based – and it's when you're booking a meeting Teams does a wonderful thing. It shows you a scheduling assistant or scheduling assistant – whichever you prefer – which shows you when other people who you're inviting for a meeting are already in meetings, so you don't invite them for a meeting at the same time.

The amount of times I get invited to meetings, when I've already got a meeting. Hmm, you can see why that's my pet peeve.

Charlie Feasby – 03:47

We also asked some of the comms community: how do you think workplace etiquette has shifted in the move to hybrid working?

Matt Crabb – 03:54

I am Matt Crabb. I am the head of employee communications and engagement at DaBeers Group. I feel that people are much more considerate of each other, particularly, as we've got to know each other more personally, perhaps, you could say, over the course of the pandemic.

So I think if anything, the pandemic has helped to break down those barriers that maybe existed beforehand between colleagues – seeing as family life and friends were kind of creeping into the working world. So if anything, I would say that people, certainly through my experience, are much closer now.

Etiquette wise, when it comes to working, I believe that we're much more considerate of each other's times. That doesn't mean that meetings don't over run. But we're much more considerate of there being a life outside of the workplace.

Gillian McGill – 04:44

My name is Gillian McGill, and I lead colleague communications and experience for Abrdn.

It's a great question, and I think employees are making choices about how and where they work.

And when you see hybrid really kick in, I think our colleagues and our employees are deciding,

'Actually, if I'm going to work at home, then I'm going to structure my day in this way, and I'm much more willing to work on Teams than engage with people over screens.'

But I think when you're in the workplace environment, people want to come in because they'll see people. They want to have a cup of coffee. They want to collaborate. They want to do the creative thing. So I think colleagues are choosing the sort of work they do and where they do it. And I think that'll continue to shift over time.

I think colleague behaviour is changing. Absolutely, as we address hybrid working, but I think we've been catapulted into it so quickly through COVID, that I think both organisations and colleagues are on catch-up. So we are learning how to work in a hybrid way, but I think we are only adopting new practices, which are helpful, now. So people are figuring out, what is the best way to work? Where am I going to work? And organisations are figuring out, therefore, what sort of space do I need to provide? What kit do I need to give my colleagues? And how do I create an office environment where they can work, but equally a home environment that enables them to work in a different way, too. So I think we've got some way to go.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 06:09

I welcome Dr Alex Gapud, our cultural anthropologist, and one of the smartest people I know. I meant that both about his brain, of course, but also he's a pretty snappy dresser too. But of course, wearing a bowtie to the office isn't the only etiquette we need to discuss. Alex, welcome to World Changers.

Dr Alex Gapud – 06:25

Thanks for having me, Elle.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 06:27

Now, proximity bias, we talked about it in the report, and it is a really big deal. So I'm really interested in your view on how managers help their people get round it.

Dr Alex Gapud – 06:36

Yeah, I think it's a really important one Elle.

I guess a lot of things for me start with educating people. And I think there's a need to educate managers on different biases in the first place, right, such as proximity bias, which, by the way, is when we, kind of, favour the people around us or the things directly in front of us. Familiarity bias, sometimes that's where we stick with what's familiar or what you already know, and staying within our comfort zone, doing things a certain way. Or the fundamental attribution error. So that's where we attribute someone's behaviour to their personality or their character. We kind of say, instead of someone made a mistake, we say that they're, you know, fill in the blank about their, about their abilities, as opposed to, they made an honest mistake, because they had an unreasonable deadline and a crazy workload. And they were already up at nine o'clock working on something right – 9pm that is.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 07:24

Yeah, like, we don't seem to veer on the side of kindness and understanding in the world of work, I think very often. Because if someone fucked up and that made you fuck up and look bad, it's like, that line of responsibility comes down to you and so your instant gut reaction might be to, you know, lash out against that, right, in a mood or temper because you've been made to look bad.

Dr Alex Gapud – 07:49

I think that's partly educating people that, that's something that we're prone to do, right? These are things that we all do. It's not like we're bad people, because we do them. It's just under stress, under our conditions – sometimes the way we've been treated in the past, so that we've been conditioned that way, we behave that way.

So I think we need to educate people. I think, especially for leaders and managers, actually, educating them and helping them be self-aware and reflexive. So by reflexive I mean, again, self-aware, being able to look at their own practice and their own performance in the mirror, I think those are really important.

Once we do that, though, it's also important to come up with viable and embedded ways to mitigate those biases. So that's back to etiquette, really formalising processes. Kind of, putting in writing, 'Here's what this is. Here's what we're going to do about this. Here's why.'

It's also worth noting that, you know, where teams are working predominantly remotely, proximity bias can actually manifest in different ways. We're in the office together recording this. So I might ask you a question instead of, maybe, someone else, you know, who might have the better answer. I think when we're working remotely, instead of favouring the people physically around us, we might actually see some teams start to rely on, kind of, the people that you interact with more frequently. So it's kind of like this virtual proximity bias of, 'Actually Elle's at the top of my Teams chats. I've got her pinned, so she's my go to for everything, even if we're not in the same place.' Right?

So I think that that, all of this, it really also links to visibility. And in particular, who managers see and who they pay attention to. So I think, kind of, the win here, the thing to aim for is to find ways that democratise that visibility, to spread it around, instead of it being the same go to people, or those that are physically on-site with you. I think that's a key step to keeping everyone in front of managers, and not just a select few.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 09:39

Alex, you blow me away with that answer. I just think workplace democracy is such an interesting topic.

Let's linger just slightly on proximity bias. And the only reason I wanted to ask is about, do you think hybrid working is changing the way we organise into those, kind of, office cliques, for lack of a better word?

Dr Alex Gapud – 10:00

I think that whenever you have familiarity and repeated action with certain people, those are the conditions to create a clique-y vibe. And I think you often do see them arise when people have a lot of shared experience together. Right?

So for example, the veterans in an organisation, people that have been there for – maybe you've got a young organisation that's seen a lot of rapid growth, and there's some people that were all there 10 years ago, maybe it's just five or six of them, but they're going to be a clique. Right? Not because they're awful people, but because they've been through stuff together, right? It's kind of a self-forming, sort of, clique.

Again, I don't think there's anything problematic or wrong about people having close relationships and shared experience in the first place. Those are actually usually healthy things in organisation, when people feel that sort of friendliness.

The problem is when those social dynamics get in the way of inclusion, and cliques can be exclusive, as opposed to inclusive. And especially when people in that clique, or that clique itself might be favoured over others, sometimes other people who might be more knowledgeable or experienced or qualified. Because that ultimately has a negative effect on the performance of the company.

But I think, again, it's managers and leaders responsibility to be aware of that possibility. And to make sure that the company is an inclusive environment where everyone gets a fair look, and everyone gets a fair chance. So that comes to project tasking. That comes to performance management, promotions. It's making sure that it's not the same people from the same clique, getting special treatment.

And it's also important for managers and leaders to be self-aware, if they are a part of that clique, and to not favour their friends, or the people constantly around them over others, because again, that creates a feeling of exclusion, which no one really wants, right? This is more and more important to us, not just from a diversity, equity and inclusion perspective, but actually as a company culture. You want to create an environment that is inclusive, where people feel like they belong.

Elle Bradley Cox – 11:52

Actually, that's made me laugh a little bit because I was looking at an article on *The Cut*, which is New York's magazine. So I read this article, lots of you out there listening might have heard it, or heard of it, because it's infamous. So it was written a little while ago, but it's called 'How to text, tip, ghost, host, and generally exist in polite society today.' And there were some really interesting insights. Some very controversial ideas of what etiquette actually means. But some of them are work based. I just thought I'd test them against you and see if you liked them, Alex, and see if you see if you did them.

So, if you're slacking together in a meeting, don't giggle.

Dr Alex Gapud – 12:31

I think it's a good one, especially if you're still on camera and have your mic on, right?

Elle Bradley-Cox – 12:38

Exactly. Really important.

And speaking of being on camera, apparently it's polite to have your camera on for everyone in the Zoom or Teams meeting – I get that. I do really like that – but for God's sake, don't Zoom in from the Palace of Versailles.

Couldn't agree more. In fact, it's one of the tips that I give people all the time.

Dr Alex Gapud – 12:54

It's a really good one, because we've definitely spoken to people and some of the research I've done, where they're just like, yeah, we're all working from home, but we can tell, like, by the oak panel furniture in your study, that you're the CEO, and I'm not. Or you know, people, especially in summer, you know, some leadership, leaders call in from, you know, what looks like an anonymous blur sort of background. They're obviously on holiday on their yacht because they're super tanned, right? It's a sort of thing of, yeah, don't be tone deaf, please.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 13:30

Yeah. And I just, I think it the whole thing kind of feeds into what we've been talking about. I would really, really recommend the article. Because also, I think it'll give us an idea of what people actually want from work interactions and how that might have changed.

But what do you think?

Dr Alex Gapud – 13:45

I think this is one we're still unpacking and still figuring out because I think our needs and our wants from work are continuously changing. I think we're seeing a lot of factors that actually make those shifts seem a lot more pronounced. Hybrid is obviously a huge one. But also, I heard a stat this morning, that by 2025, it's expected that the majority of employees will be millennials and Gen Z. And so for example, you know, in our world, we're seeing a lot of companies that are more intent on more purposeful, more meaningful work, and really dialling up that angle, that sense of purpose. Because I think that's something that millennials and Gen Z, I think we have a slightly different relationship with work than our parents did.

I think for a lot of our parents might have been a bit more transactional, right? This is a good job that pays a good wage that allows me to provide for my family, as opposed to, I think, you know.

Thinking about some of our parents, thinking about my parents, I'm like, I see you mom and dad.

But I also want my work to feel like it's something that I find interesting, that I feel like is something good and purposeful in the world, that is also a pay check. So I think, you know, our desires from work are continuously evolving.

I think when we think about our relationships at work, that's another thing that continues to evolve. I think that one of the risks about our work relationships in hybrid is that I think, for better or worse, and I actually do think probably, for worse, our relationships become much more 2D. They become much more transactional, and they become much more point to point. I mean, how often do we actually just ping a message on Teams? Just ask them a question. And once you get that answer, you just get back on with it.

As opposed to it might have been, if you and I are working in the office, I might come over to you and say, 'Hey, Elle. How's your weekend?' And we might chat about, you know, how your weekend was, what you got up to. We might chat about, you know, what you saw on TV last night, right? And all of those things, they seem like they're unimportant to work. But they're important to our relationships.

Because again, back to this idea that that, you know, 2D relationships, sometimes we only know colleagues as squares on Teams. But actually, when we communicate with each other, I think as human beings we need and we crave deeper 3D relationships that are more holistic.

And it's interesting to see how our need for that is increasingly met, or unmet in hybrid work. I've got a feeling that many of us are going to feel much more alienated and disconnected from each other in hybrid than we would have been if we're all in the office. I mean, think about some of those great, like, workplace TV shows like *The Office*. Could you imagine that being hybrid and having the same sort of camaraderie and those connections?

Elle Bradley-Cox – 16:23

Just to go back slightly to what you were just saying about age and, kind of, millennials. I noticed recently that John Lewis has just done its gender pay gap reporting. And it's also reported on age. And that I imagine is, because I've read the report, like, 25% of its people are in the 56+ age gap category. And I found that completely fascinating.

I haven't seen anyone else do age pay gap reporting before. So if anyone's listening out there and is doing some pioneering work in that world, or indeed works at John Lewis, I'd be really interested to talk more about it.

Because I do think that actually, we often say, you know, like millennials, and Gen Z, they're the most important part of the work force. But we run the risk of being not inclusive ourselves and thinking about, like, actually, how does the, kind of, older generations want to integrate into hybrid working? How do they, what's their etiquette? Is that very different and disparate from Millennial and Gen Z?

Dr Alex Gapud – 17:19

I mean, it makes me think of a lot of different things.

One is that when we talk about generations, there's so many interesting things going on. Is it that actually these generations have different values or people at different stages of their careers?

Right?

I think about, you know, my experiences 15 years ago. One of my first jobs, noticing that a lot of them are millennials around me, people of a similar age had a very different relationship to work. I wonder if you interview us 15 years later, if we actually feel a little bit more like our parents might have about our jobs and about work. My guess is we probably do. There's one thing that makes me think of.

The other thing it makes me think of that was when we talk about that 55, 56+ cohort, I think a lot of people's natural reaction will be, well, that senior leadership, and the senior leadership will have certain views on what ought to be done. For example, you see a lot of older senior leaders that are very against hybrid or very against remote. Some that are very much for it and kind of see the benefit, but some that are very traditional in their ways, and very against it.

I think what's also interesting when you mentioned John Lewis, is you are going to have a lot of other people, especially in retail organisations who are older. And what does hybrid mean for them?

What does hybrid mean for them as frontline, predominately frontline, workers as well? Does it mean anything?

But it's a really interesting one, when we think about, yeah, that age balance that generational balance, and making sure that things are truly inclusive for everybody, not just the majority.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 18:42

The language that we use as communicators, the, kind of, code of conduct we expect applies to everybody and isn't just hyper focused on one or another great project shouldn't be anyway.

Alex, this has been bloody fascinating. Thank you for your time. As always.

Dr Alex Gapud – 18:57

Thank you, Elle. Always a pleasure to speak with you.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 19:04

If you want to explore etiquette a little more do join us later this month for our webinar, where you can put your questions to our expert panel. We'll share the details in the show notes and on our social channels.

If you want to continue the conversation in the meantime, do come and chat to us over on Twitter @scarlettabbott or drop us an email at hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk. We'll see you next time for another dive into World Changers 2023.

World Changers is a podcast by employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott hosted by Elle Bradley-Cox. Find out more at [scarlettabbott.co.uk](https://www.scarlettabbott.co.uk).