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BOUNDARIES AT WORK IN THE SMARTPHONE AGE

Never before have we lived in a time where zones of our work and life interface, overlap, and overwhelm as they do today. Boosted by technology, personal devices, and social media platforms, sharing – and over sharing – of information is constant, as is our access. What used to be a standard expectation to not receive or make personal calls at work is now often viewed as a given – creating a new norm where one cannot be without his or her smartphone, and with surreptitious texting and “cute” ringtones abounding in workplaces everywhere.

Email continues to be tricky in that not everyone handles the written word as nimbly as the spoken one, leading to potential misperceptions, misunderstandings, and the possibility of unprofessional banter or unwanted attachments and embedded links.

These advances in communication and technology help to highlight a fundamental and needed baseline for work and personal life: **good boundaries.**

To keep a mindful awareness of what’s

appropriate for personal technology at work, consider the following tips:

Use of Smartphones

- During the normal course of the day, cell phone ringers should be kept on “vibrate” mode, or set to a low volume with a conservative ringtone.
- In meetings, ring tones should be silenced.
- If it is necessary to answer a call, leave meetings or areas where others are working and pick up the call only once you have exited. A loud “Hello?” while hurriedly leaving a space is more distracting than most phone users realize.
- “Discreet Texting” is a myth – people actually do notice the head down, absorbed tapping one may think is happening without detection. In a one-to-one or group setting, texters should excuse

themselves given that texts happen in extended volleys.

Use of Email

It’s tempting to check personal email, or access it from a smartphone. Instead, set two times in the day to check personal email when on a lunch break or at day’s end. Otherwise, the only email that should be active is the work email account.

Use of Social Media

Simply put, work is not the place for social media. No matter if it’s all right there on the iPhone – it is simply off limits unless you are on a break.



Boundaries and the content of communication technologies at work

In addition to the need for boundaries on use of communication technologies and media, there must be boundaries on content when it comes to the workplace. Going back to the maxim “employees are at work to work”, the following tips on proper content and boundaries apply:

Personal phone calls and sounds at work:

- **Personal conversations on cell phones should be conducted privately.** Others may be uncomfortable to hear what sounds like bickering, emotional, romantic or other personal contents of a call. More and more, people are demonstrating that they are unfiltered when connected to their phones; avoid this problem and its impact on coworkers by finding a quiet space to make or take a call when absolutely necessary.

- **Avoid automatically picking up the phone.** Taking an unexpected call from the bank about an overdraft is just one example of how personal matters inappropriately and distractingly flow into the work world and sink productivity. Let calls go to voicemail; retrieve them when appropriate, and make an arrangement to take a break if there is some critical need to return a call.

- **Ringtones that involve blasts of music, “funny” sound files, or are particularly distracting should be set to vibrate.** If you elect an impersonal, standard ringtone, keep it very low or on vibrate as the best practice for a personal cell. It may be helpful to think of generic, quiet ringtones as the equivalent of business clothes, whereas a personal, too loud ringtone can many times be the audible equivalent of wearing non-work appropriate attire.

Email content boundaries at work:

- **Anything sent on work email is the property of the employer and can be reviewed at any time.** If you wouldn’t want the boss reading it, you should not be writing or sending it.

- **Email does not allow for multi dimensional understanding.** Unlike a conversation where colleagues can see body language, facial expression, and hear intonation, email is just the black and white written word. Use best manners always, start emails with a greeting (“Hi Jane – I hope you are doing well.”) and end with an appropriate closing (“I look forward to hearing your thoughts. Thanks, John”). Without “best manners”, emails can’t help but sound blunt or abrupt.

- **If you have an expectation, convey it, and do so politely.** Email users are flooded with mail. Use your subject line to clearly capture the “why” of your email, use a flag to indicate priority, and in your emails, state clearly but respectfully what information it is that you seek and when you would like to hear back. If you don’t articulate expectations, you can expect that they won’t be met.

- **Never email when upset.** Write your draft, leave the “To” field blank, and save your draft. Review it in twenty minutes. Read it from the perspective of the recipient. Find a trusted, objective person to review it for you. Most of all, ask yourself: *should I be talking directly to this person instead?* Most times, the answer will be yes, and you may save yourself the discomfort of a too-impulsive reply that leaves boundaries feeling battered.

Social media content and boundaries related to work:

- **Remember that social media can create uncomfortable traps.** Think about how you present yourself and that colleagues, bosses, customers/clients and even future employers may review your profiles and content at some time. What you post lives forever, and leaves your control. Consider your personal settings very carefully, with best practice to keep your accounts private.

- **Referencing work or work information on personal social media may violate work rules.** Be very careful about crossing boundaries here; ask your supervisor any questions you might have.

For as advanced as society becomes in its technology, the old fashioned rules still apply – especially at work. Keep yourself on the straight and narrow with the reminder that *employees are at work to work*. Personal life distractions have always posed a boundary challenge for work, and must be even more carefully prevented with today’s communication options. Turning sounds off and setting break times to check email, voicemail, or texts are essential to stay focused at work.

Boundaries are critical in order to stay productive and demonstrate good judgment to your employer. Setting and keeping good boundaries will also reduce your stress and make you feel a better sense of control.



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