

A *to* Z

Business Etiquette Guide for IT Professionals

WE GET IT. WE SPEAK IT. WE KNOW IT.



Robert Half[®]
Technology

Information Technology Professionals

A to Z

“We must learn which ceremonies may be breached occasionally at our convenience and which ones may never be if we are to live pleasantly with our fellow man.”

– Amy Vanderbilt

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Information technology (IT) professionals know computers inside and out. But being well versed with a variety of hardware and software is no longer enough to get ahead in today’s workplace. In addition to possessing technical skills, an IT professional’s career success also depends on his or her “soft” skills, the set of abilities that help smooth interactions among individuals and groups.

As technology becomes more prominent within organizations, and IT staff increasingly interact with other business departments, mastering the rules of etiquette will only grow in importance. In short, knowing how to appropriately respond to a rude and impatient end user who can’t find the “Caps Lock” button is as important as knowing how to solve true technical emergencies.

The protocols that govern professional behavior range from the seemingly benign (use of e-mail and cell phones) to the more complex (how to deftly network at an industry seminar). The challenge many IT professionals face in heeding the code of conduct is twofold: honing one’s social graces, and then keeping track of the rules as they continually shift in response to a changing business environment.

The *A to Z Business Etiquette Guide for IT Professionals* offers tips and insight on everything from managing professional relationships to navigating the sometimes tricky waters of dining with a client. (Remember: The salad fork is placed to the far left!) It’s true that you never get a second chance to make a first impression, and the simple tools contained in this guide will help make your manners shine – even when the manners of your coworkers might not.

A : ATTIRE

“It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.”

– Oscar Wilde,
The Picture of Dorian Gray

- Many IT departments have a less formal dress code than other areas of the organization. Nonetheless, you should make sure your style conforms to the standards set by your supervisor and other managers. After all, a professional image instills confidence in your ability to get the job done.
- Even if casual dress is acceptable, your clothes should not appear worn, faded or stained.
- When meeting with senior managers, staff from other departments or outside contacts, take into account their likely attire and dress accordingly. Doing so will make both you and those you’re meeting with feel more comfortable.

B : BALANCE

“We come into this world head first and go out feet first; in between, it is all a matter of balance.”

– Paul Boese

- If you telecommute from home or other offices a few days a week or have a flexible schedule, be sure to communicate your work hours to your coworkers.
- Conversely, be respectful of others’ schedules. If you need to reach someone regarding several issues or requests, bundle your queries and send them all at once so your colleague isn’t interrupted multiple times.
- It is not uncommon for IT personnel to find themselves working extended hours on special projects or urgent fixes for critical business functions. In order to avoid burnout, try to maintain a balance between professional responsibilities and personal life.

C : CELL PHONES

“This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.”

– Western Union internal memo, 1876

- Though IT personnel tend to be comfortable with the latest electronic gadgetry, many inadvertently overlook an obvious etiquette point: During business meetings, turn off the ringer of your cell phone and let voice mail answer any calls. Even if set on “vibrate,” your phone or BlackBerry might still make noise, so double-check to make sure it’s silenced.
- When you must take an incoming call or answer an urgent e-mail during a meeting, excuse yourself and make it brief. Your colleagues don’t want to hear you discuss a systems problem or watch you type an e-mail response.
- If you’re in your car or a bustling building, be mindful of background noise. If you’re doing more listening than talking, put your phone on mute.

D : DINING

“You can tell a lot about a fellow’s character by his way of eating jellybeans.”

– Ronald Reagan

- When having lunch or dinner with a client, steer clear of unshucked oysters, crab legs, ribs, fish with lots of tiny bones and other complicated or saucy foods, which can make a mess.
- Two common mistakes during business meals: drinking too much alcohol and ordering the most expensive item on the menu. Indulge in the conversation, instead.
- If you’re entertaining a colleague or business associate, arrive at the restaurant early and arrange to have the bill handed directly to you when the meal ends. Or better yet, provide a credit card to your server or the maitre d’ before your guests arrive.

E: E-MAIL

“When it comes to the mail, I feel it is better to receive than to give.”

– Joseph Epstein

- Use the same rules of punctuation and capitalization you would in a letter. Abandoning either can appear lazy and unprofessional.
- Emoticons should be used sparingly, if at all. If you find you need to use them to keep your message from being misinterpreted, it may be better to have an in-person or telephone conversation, instead.
- When selecting an e-mail address for a personal account — if you intend to use it for any work-related purposes — keep in mind that your choice should convey a sense of professionalism. Avoid anything overly casual or personal.
- Use the subject field to identify the content of your message. As your e-mail thread gets longer and more topics are discussed, consider changing the subject line to reflect the new discussion points.
- Be judicious when using “reply all,” or copying and blind copying others on messages. Make sure those who receive your e-mail really need to be kept in the loop.
- Even the most advanced spell-checker won’t catch words that are correct yet out of context. Proofread your message carefully before hitting “send.”

F: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

“We rarely forget that which has made a deep impression on our minds.”

– Tryon Edwards

- Communicate with your whole body: Stand when someone enters the room, make eye contact, smile and shake the person’s hand firmly, but without crushing his or her fingers.
- Create a 30-second synopsis of who you are and what you do. A memorable, concise sound bite will keep your name and background in mind long after you’ve left.
- Listen attentively, don’t interrupt and don’t monopolize the conversation.

G: GRATITUDE

“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues but the parent of all others.”

– Cicero

- Don’t overlook the power of appreciation. Everyone likes to be acknowledged for hard work or dedication to a business or team goal.
- Let your coworkers know they’ve done a good job – and do it sooner rather than later.
- Money isn’t the only reward. Be creative in your recognition. You can include a mention in your departmental or company newsletter, make a public acknowledgement at a meeting, or simply write a thank-you note. All are powerful motivational tools and help illustrate your appreciation.
- Base your positive comments on specific actions rather than generalities. Highlight how a colleague’s particular accomplishments have contributed to a project’s success. For example, rather than “Jack was a great help in meeting our team’s goals,” say “Jack’s long hours and skill in testing and debugging the subroutines in our new application enabled us to beat the deadline for its release date by a month.”

H: HOLIDAY CARDS

“The manner of giving is worth more than the gift.”

– Pierre Corneille

- Avoid sending cards with religious messages. Link the occasion with your message – express how grateful you are for a team member’s assistance on a big project or a manager’s flexibility in scheduling, and how you look forward to another year of working together.
- Always include a handwritten message for a personal touch.
- Although it’s tempting to use computer-printed mailing labels, address your cards by hand, as well.

I : INTRODUCTIONS

“I always have trouble remembering three things: faces, names, and – I can’t remember what the third thing is.”

– Fred Allen

- Having trouble remembering names is a common problem. To avoid embarrassment, restate the name of the person you’re meeting once he or she has made the introduction. (“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Tom.”) And you can help others remember your name by stating it slowly and clearly.
- If you’re attending a convention or meeting where a name tag is provided, wear it near your right shoulder, not your left. When people shake your hand, their eyes will go directly to the tag, which will help them remember your name. And make sure it’s visible at all times.
- When you’re speaking to someone, and another person you know walks up, always make the introduction.
- Although some IT departments can be more informal about rank, a proper business introduction is based on hierarchy: Introduce the junior person to the more senior one.
- When making an introduction, explain who people are and offer a memorable piece of information about them, which also will serve as a conversation starter. For example, “Curt, this is Elaine, our network administrator. She just successfully upgraded the network operating system on all our servers. Elaine, Curt is vice president of technology for XYZ Corp. He’s investigating the pros and cons of moving to a Linux-based system.”

J : JOKES

“A difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on affections.”

– George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

- Humor is tricky business in the workplace. Avoid off-color jokes or snide, sarcastic remarks. And never make comments on religion, gender, race or sexual preference.
- Don’t send or forward jokes via e-mail to business acquaintances. You might think it’s hilarious, but there’s no guarantee your recipient will, too.
- IT professionals often work under tight deadlines; consider humor as a way to defuse the tension. An affable personality will make your coworkers feel more comfortable and contribute to team effectiveness.

K : KEEPING CONFIDENCES

“Whoever gossips to you will gossip about you.”

– Spanish proverb

- When a colleague tells you something privately, assume it is meant for your ears only. If the person wants others to know, he or she will make that decision.
- IT professionals frequently deal with confidential matters, such as customer information or copyrighted program code. Such information should never be revealed to anyone, including friends and business contacts.
- Don’t gossip about former employers or colleagues. People will wonder if you do the same about them.

L : LISTENING

“There are people who, instead of listening to what is being said to them, are already listening to what they are going to say themselves.”

– Albert Guinon

- Listening means more than waiting for your turn to talk. Concentrate on the other person’s words; don’t let your mind wander. You may miss an important point and ask a question that’s already been addressed.
- Resist the urge to jump into the conversation when someone pauses in thought. He or she might be searching for words, not inviting a new comment. Wait a beat or two and then respond.
- IT personnel often interact with end users from other departments or outside the organization. When listening to their problems or concerns in person, use body language to show you’re paying attention – smile, nod or agree as appropriate. Likewise when responding over the telephone, demonstrate through interjections (“I see,” “I understand”) and follow-up questions that you comprehend what is being said.
- Watch people’s facial expressions and gestures for cues that you’ve lost their attention. If you catch them repeatedly breaking eye contact with you, fidgeting or edging away from you, it’s time to wrap up what you’re saying.

M: MEETINGS

“Talk of nothing but business, and dispatch that business quickly.”

– Aldus Manutius, placard on the door of the Aldine Press

- Timing is everything, especially when you’ve called a meeting. Start the session on time. Beginning at 3:15 when you’ve specified 3:00 will only reward and encourage tardiness.
- Similarly, specify an ending time so others can plan their schedules accordingly. If it looks like you’ve got too much to cover, set aside the last five minutes to schedule a follow-up.
- You wouldn’t try to develop a software application without knowing its functions and requirements, and similarly you shouldn’t go into a meeting cold either. Ask attendees for topics of discussion and review the agenda beforehand.
- Resist the urge to over-invite. Make sure every person attending has expertise on the subject or will be affected by the topic of discussion.

N: NEGATIVITY

“I let that negativity roll off me like water off a duck’s back. If it’s not positive, I didn’t hear it.”

– George Foreman

- Negativity is like a virus – it spreads. Denial of an obvious problem isn’t productive; it’s far better to identify what’s wrong and collaborate on a solution.
- Working in IT means facing the occasional frustration, whether it’s a virus that has infected your network or an intractable software bug that’s holding up application development. Maintaining a positive attitude improves the situation for everyone involved.

O: OFFICE POLITICS

“Politics is a blood sport.”

– Aneurin Bevan

- Pay attention to political undercurrents, which may help you navigate tricky situations, but avoid becoming directly involved in office politics.
- Be wary of overly ambitious colleagues, who might do whatever it takes to advance their careers, such as saying unkind or untrue things about another coworker.
- Maintain cordial but professional relationships with your managers and coworkers. Be friendly and open, but don’t share intimate details about your personal life – a little psychological distance is healthy.

P: PRESENTATIONS

“Lead the audience by the nose to the thought.”

– Laurence Olivier

- Even the most seasoned performers rehearse their acts before showtime. To uncover potential problems before making presentations, do the same, checking as many variables as possible, including microphone, PowerPoint file and projector.
- Provide clear visuals and handouts of key points to your audience. Technology concepts can be complex; remember that information presented both visually and verbally will be retained more easily.
- Follow the Golden Rule: Present unto others as you would like others to present unto you. Speak clearly and audibly, don’t exceed the time limit and allow sufficient time for questions and answers.
- When attending a speaking event, arrive on time, turn off electronic devices, refrain from eating or drinking, and don’t participate in side conversations.
- If you must arrive late, slip in the back unobtrusively. If you must leave early, take a seat near the door and exit as quietly as possible.
- During the question-and-answer period, ask concise questions; however, don’t try to outshine the speaker by showing off your knowledge of the subject.

Q : QUITTING

“When work is a pleasure, life is joy!
When work is a duty, life is slavery.”
– Maxim Gorky, *The Lower Depths*

- Give at least two weeks’ notice, or more, if it will take additional time to train your replacement. Be prepared, however, to be asked to leave that day if your company prefers to transition new roles more quickly.
- Plan your departure so it’s a smooth transition for those who remain. It’s especially important for IT professionals, who may be involved in complex projects, to create documentation informing managers of each task’s status and the steps needed to advance their progress.
- Leave on the best possible terms, even if there are acrimonious feelings. Avoid expressing anger to your boss or coworkers – you might need them as references down the line.
- Don’t use the exit interview as a forum for venting your pent-up frustrations or seeking revenge, but do offer honest, constructive feedback.

R : R.S.V.P.

“Consideration for others is the basis of a good life, and a good society.”
– Confucius

- IT personnel often find themselves with invitations to seminars, training sessions, and trade shows, as well as to business luncheons and dinners. These offers routinely include an “R.S.V.P.” Too many people confuse these initials with “regrets only,” which means just that – call only if you cannot attend. When R.S.V.P. is printed on a formal invitation, you must contact the event host or sponsor to either accept or decline. Correct head counts allow the host to accurately account for food, seating, handouts and the like.
- Do your best to respond by the date specified on the invitation. Avoid putting it off until the last minute – it will look as if you were waiting for a better offer to come along.

S : SPEAKER- PHONES

“Well, are you there?”
– Greeting of telephone operators before 1895

- Always ask permission before placing a caller on speakerphone. Never put someone on speaker if he or she is unaware that others can hear the conversation. This isn’t just etiquette; failing to do so could also have legal consequences.
- At the beginning of a conference call, introduce all participants, including those who might be in the room but are not speaking. If your call is attended by a large group, or even a small one of people who might not know each other, introduce yourself each time you speak. Likewise, if you’re addressing a question to a particular individual on the other end, use his or her name to avoid confusion.
- Speak clearly and slowly. Pause before responding to what those on the other end of the conversation have said. Speakerphones have a tendency to cut out at times, and other people might not have finished speaking.

T : TELEPHONE MANNERS

“I’ve suffered from all of the hang-ups known, and none is as bad as the telephone.”
– Richard Armour

- When you call someone, always ask first if he or she has time to speak to you before launching into the subject at hand.
- Always ask if it’s OK – and wait for an answer – before putting someone on hold.
- When leaving a voice-mail message, clearly state your name (spell it if you’ve never spoken to the person before), phone number, company, date and reason for your call. Repeat your name and number at the end of the message.
- Don’t leave an overly lengthy voice-mail message. If you have a great deal of information to convey, it might be more appropriate to wait until you can speak to the person directly.
- Your voice-mail greeting should contain your name, company name, department and extension, and the assurance that you’ll return calls promptly. Try to return messages within 24 hours.

“The more he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

- A good rule of thumb for picking the correct utensil when dining out is to work from the outside in, starting with the first course. For example, your salad fork is on the far left of your plate; the one to use with your entrée is to its right. Dessert utensils get top billing above your plate.
- For formal dining, your table setting could include up to three forks, three spoons, two knives, two plates and multiple glasses. Know which utensil or plate is yours (food plates to the left, beverages to the right), and when in doubt, take your cue from your fellow diners.
- Put used silverware on your plate, not directly on the tablecloth.
- If you drop a piece of silverware, don't disappear under the table to retrieve it. Flag your server and ask for a replacement.
- When finished eating, place your knife and fork across your plate, pointing at 11 o'clock.

“A vacation used to be a luxury; however, in today's world, it has become a necessity.”

– Unknown

- Leave your desk clean and well organized (and make sure your team knows where to find important documents and files). Your inboxes – physical and electronic – should be as empty as possible, as well.
- You don't need to tell people where you're going, but let them know you'll be gone. Update your voice-mail message to let callers know you're gone and use an out-of-office return reply on your e-mail, making sure to include an alternate point of contact for immediate requests.
- Try to schedule vacations so you won't be out when major projects are reaching their peak. And coordinate with your coworkers so everyone is not gone at the same time, especially during prime vacation periods, like summer and the winter holidays.

“As is our confidence, so is our capacity.”

– William Hazlitt

- Networking isn't limited to client-server systems, LANs and WANs. It also means interacting with colleagues and other professionals at conferences, conventions and similar gatherings. When meeting people in such situations, develop a one- or two-sentence statement that concisely describes what you do. Be careful, though, not to talk too much about yourself or your business.
- To start a conversation, approach someone standing alone or a group of three or more. Don't interrupt a discussion between two people. Ask questions – and remember the answers. In addition to discussing job-related or technical issues, brush up on your small talk by reading the newspaper, or visiting your favorite online news site, before going to a networking function. Just avoid loaded topics like politics and religion.
- A conversation doesn't have to be lengthy to be memorable. If you sense it's time to move on, tell the other person that you enjoyed the discussion, and don't forget to offer your business card.

“No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.”

– Aesop, *The Lion and the Mouse*

- Courtesy applies to the office copier, too. If you have a lengthy copy job that will tie up the machine for more than a minute or two, let your coworkers know so they can plan accordingly.
- Never copy your resume or personal correspondence on your office's copier.
- If you use the last sheet of paper, refill the tray. The same goes for toner – replace the cartridge if it's running low.
- Don't walk away from a paper jam. If you can't fix it yourself, notify the appropriate person so that the machine can be up and running again as soon as possible.

“The excellence of a gift lies in its appropriateness rather than in its value.”

– Charles Dudley Warner, *Eleventh Study*

- While giving small holiday gifts to your colleagues and managers is a nice gesture, it's not required. If you do receive a gift, it's not necessary to reciprocate. A simple thank-you note will suffice.
- If you're unsure of a recipient's tastes, consider giving a gift card to a coffeehouse, bookstore or other general-interest store.
- Because of dietary and religious restrictions, be careful with gifts of food or alcohol. Instead, consider an invitation to a luncheon or dinner where people can make their own choices.

“Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Circles*

- If you show genuine excitement for your job, people will take pleasure in working with or for you.
- Let your enthusiasm come through in your facial expressions (alert eyes, relaxed smile), your words (warm, friendly greetings) and your overall style (cooperative, positive, solution-oriented).
- Passion for your work shows. You'll be perceived as a confident, competent, talented IT professional.

THE LEADING RESOURCE

Robert Half Technology has built a reputation as the leading resource for IT employment and management trends and advice. Each year, our firm conducts targeted research and publishes articles, booklets, white papers and other informational tools to assist both job seekers in finding meaningful employment and companies in locating the talent they need to remain competitive.

Salary Guide, Advice Booklets and White Papers

In addition to our Guide to Etiquette, Robert Half Technology produces a number of complimentary publications to help IT professionals navigate the hiring and job-search processes. These resources include our annual *Salary Guide*, *Glossary of Job Descriptions for IT Professionals*, *What You Should Know About Background Checks*, *How to Check References When References are Hard to Check* and *Creating Compensation and Benefits Packages for Today's Technology Professionals*. We also publish a number of Quick Reference Guides on technologies such as .NET, Active Directory and J2EE.

Books and Columns

Our chairman and CEO, Max Messmer, is a widely published workplace expert, whose popular advice column, *Resumania®*, is syndicated by Scripps-Howard News Service. He also is the author of *Motivating Employees For Dummies*; *Human Resources Kit For Dummies*; *Managing Your Career For Dummies*; *Job Hunting For Dummies*, 2nd Edition; and *The Fast Forward MBA in Hiring* (all published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).

National Surveys

Robert Half Technology conducts regular surveys of executives and professionals throughout North America to provide our clients and candidates with up-to-date information about the employment market. Since 1995, our quarterly *Robert Half Technology IT Hiring Index and Skills Report* has forecast national hiring levels and now includes information on IT employment trends in major metropolitan areas.

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