

Manners matter more than you know

By Roxana Popescu

When Tamiko Zablith decided to open an etiquette school in Paris, her idea met with staunch skepticism from French acquaintances. "Almost 99 percent of the French people said it will never work," said Zablith, who grew up in the United States. "They think they don't need to be educated. 'Savoir vivre originated with Louis XIV,' they say. 'And we're certainly not going to have an American teach us.'"

Now French clients and people of diverse backgrounds are flocking to Minding Manners, her school on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, to learn about business and international etiquette. Her private consultations start at \$240 per hour, and the corporate group program starts at \$1,520.

A tide is turning in the approach to international business protocol. If the courtesy-starved U.S. corporate culture has prompted a resurgence in etiquette education over the past five or so years, the trend is now picking up globally. Business schools are building professional courtesy courses into their curricula, and companies are including such programs for new hires and advancing managers, etiquette instructors said.

Even at companies with no etiquette training, professionals recognize that having social graces in the office and knowing the protocol of foreign cultures can make or break success.

"In cross-border deals, to me etiquette is not an 'edge' thing. It is a prerequisite to being effective," said Mark Greene, a partner in international corporate law at Cravath, Swaine & Moore.

"At the end of the day, you're not going to be judged on how you hold your fork," Greene said. "It's about your ability to make a meaningful connection with your client. It's about your ability to understand where your client is coming from."



Meritxell Duran

Etiquette starts counting from the hiring process, when candidates are evaluated in part on how they will reflect upon an employer.

"If somebody doesn't have the self-awareness and self-respect to conduct themselves in a polite and business-like fashion, then that could be an indication of their lack of ability to be a strong performer," Greene said. This is particularly true given that candidates have 20 minutes to make an impression in a first-round interview.

"If I have three people to choose from, and they all have the skills, which one will represent our company best, and who do other people enjoy working with best? All of a sudden it's those personal skills that come to the top," said Peter Post, a director of the Emily Post Institute and author of "The Etiquette Advantage in Business."

Given that cell phone etiquette is practically an oxymoron and hasty lunches have taken the "table" out of table manners, it takes a modicum of effort to make a good impression.

The experts' advice: Go the extra mile to interact personally, take the time to be considerate, put others' needs first, and learn about culture or context. "It's not very difficult stuff. But it's a big change" from how people tend to behave, Post said.

A perfect example is the thank-you note. E-mailing someone after a job interview is acceptable. "But if you really want to stand out, don't use e-mail," Post said. With an old-fashioned note, "you'll be remembered longer. It's more personal. It stays there for several days. If you send an e-mail, then they close it, hit delete and it's gone. So from a personal, selfish point of view, which person do you want to be?"

A key concern of etiquette experts is what to do about intrusive technology. Each innovation calls for another set of guidelines. Where does the cell phone go during a business meeting? What about a power lunch? When is it unacceptable to BlackBerry?

"The technology keeps changing, and people just don't know what to do," said Kate Zabriskie, founder of Business Training Works near Washington, D.C., whose fees start at \$2,800 for group training. She provided this general rule: "Whoever is standing in front of you in a warm body takes priority over any technology."

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