

Soft Skills at Work: Punctuality never goes out of style

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital

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Can you recall attending a meeting that started on time? No, I can't, you say?

Or, do you know an employee who consistently arrives late to work, causing co-workers and clients to wait? Yes, you probably say.

Lately there is an ongoing debate, particularly in blog discussions, about how relevant it is to be on time. It is important to note that these entries are not referring to positions where physically being at work is always essential, such as in medical offices.

One post I saw wondered, "With more employers allowing flexible schedules, is being 'on time' by normal standards a trend that's diminishing? Are employers doing themselves a disservice by not being flexible, or not?"

The theme in these posts is often "me" focused without regard to how being late affects co-workers or clients. These people feel they can do their work effectively whether they are punctual or not and therefore it shouldn't matter what time they arrive.

But talk to most business people and you will hear the other side of the debate. They will say an employee who is late affects other people's ability to do their jobs. For example, if you have agreed to meet with a co-worker to discuss how to proceed with a project and you are late, it means this employee's time has just been wasted. And worse yet, it shows a lack of respect for your colleague.

While some still will argue that working hard and getting your work done ought to be enough, Jackie Snead, owner of NeadStuff, a promotional products company in Glen Burnie, gave me specific examples of how a business is affected when employees aren't on time.

"Depending on which position the employee holds, it could hold up production of the entire plant or could mean an important phone call is missed or a file not available and customer service is affected," Jackie said.

As I've conducted interviews over the years, employers have stressed that being punctual is a vital skill because it demonstrates reliability.

"Being on time is one way to build your reputation as a person other people can count on," Jackie said. "If I'm not at a meeting, people assume something is wrong because they have come to know I'll be there."

Ken Kay, president of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, told me about studies his organization has done that support Jackie's belief.

"It is clear from surveys with human resource officials that professionalism (such as showing up on time) is a major aspect of retaining and excelling in the workplace," Kay said. "That is why, in addition to rigorous core subject knowledge, learning and innovation skills, we included life and career skills such as self-direction and responsibility in our Framework for 21st Century Learning."

However, some employees are still not convinced. They look at flex-time and other alternative work options and wonder why it is even important to be punctual.

"There is a reason things start at a certain time," Jackie said. "It is so everyone can participate in whatever the activity, job or meeting is and no one is unfairly expected to come when they are not available."

If you are frequently late, consider these strategies:

Each evening, check your calendar for tomorrow's appointments or meetings.

Before going to bed, organize items you'll need the next day, such as clothes and food.

From your appointment time, work backward. If your meeting is at 2 p.m., determine travel time and add 10-15 minutes to allow for delays. You may need to leave at 1:15 instead of 1:30 to arrive on time or better still, to be early.

Even if you will be just a few minutes late, call the person you are meeting to let him/her know of your situation.

Being on time is important. The end result is that you show respect for others.

"I've had to wait for people and it is greatly annoying as there is little else to do," Jackie said. "We all have so very little of time to waste. When you come on time, it clearly shows you are a responsible and dependable person."

In these days of competing for, getting and keeping your job, demonstrating your reliability is a "must do" every day.

CONNECT! Coalition

The Kick-Off Meeting on Feb. 26 generated a lot of interest and excitement for CONNECT!

In the coming months, the Program and Curriculum Development Subcommittee will develop guidelines for organizations and trainers to follow. The goal of CONNECT! is to create a certificate of completion that employers will recognize.

Students and adults who go through the essential workplace behavior training and consistently demonstrate the skills will be eligible to receive the certificate.

Trainers interested in being notified about curriculum guidelines and others wanting to get involved are asked to contact Sue Gallagher at sgallagher@aawdc.org.

Marcia Hall, founder of Reputation COUNTS, is a workplace behavior trainer and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, the Anne Arundel County group of organizations dedicated to promoting the importance of essential workplace skills, and can be reached at marcia@reputationcounts.com.

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