

PARALEGAL TODAY™

Professional Presence! The Power of Business Etiquette

(What Every Newbie Needs to Know)

By Stayce Wagner

If you are a newbie working in a law firm, you have met at least one of them by now. You know who I am talking about -- The Paralegal Superstar. This paralegal has the ability to convince the IT manager to make her computer fixes a priority; she can motivate worn out paralegals to look forward to working overtime over a three-day weekend; and she can take charge of a status meeting with the full support of her attorney team. All this and more - without a drop of managerial power. How does she do it?

Professional Presence

Welcome to the world of paralegals, where professional presence is developed through the use of modern and relevant business etiquette. Yes, of course, it is a given that technical skills and knowledge are important. But, no matter how much you know or how many credentials you earn, if your business etiquette skills are not top notch, your job will be difficult (if not impossible) to manage and your career may stall.

Why are business etiquette skills so important to a

paralegal's success? Having had a successful paralegal career that spanned more than 20 years, these skills are so important to a paralegal's success because paralegals have meaningful responsibility, but no real managerial power. Remember, because you work under the supervision of attorneys, the managerial power lies with them. So when you need the IT department to fix your computer during the lunch hour or you need a couple of paralegals to help finish a last minute assignment, short of asking the attorney to make these busy



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professionals help you (not a good move in most circumstances), you must rely on the power of the positive relationships that you have built throughout your career. The power of trust, respect, and goodwill is what you will use to rally the troops to follow your lead and come to your aid. And like many good things, these relationships take time to develop, so it is a smart idea to begin building them from day one of your legal career. Here are some basic pointers to get you started.

Dress for Success

You are the new kid on the block, so dress like you are happy to be there. If the firm doesn't have a dress code, take a look around to see how everyone else dresses. You want to follow the example of those who are clean and neat, then bump it up, but just a bit. You want to be seen as someone credible, a professional, not someone who spends all of her expendable income on designer fashion.

If you are sporting ink (that is, a tattoo), be sure to know the firm's rules on visible tattoos. You may find it surprising to learn that many firms prohibit visible tattoos. True, popular culture has decided that tattoos are art, but many managers in corporate environments still frown upon them, so why risk

creating a negative impression?

One more point: there might be those in the firm whose only direct interaction with you is a nod and smile each morning on the elevator ride from the parking lot to the office. If your hair is wet (what, you don't have a hair dryer?), you haven't put your face on, or tucked in your shirt, what impression will they have of you? Case closed. Finish getting dressed before you come to work.

Meeting and Greeting Others

The basic hierarchy at most law firms consists of lawyers and everyone else, so remember to address all of the attorneys as Mr. or Ms. until invited to be on a first name basis – even if they are younger than you. You should also address all department heads in the same way. We live in a casual society, so most attorneys and managers will invite you to use their first name, but others will not. Note: Ms. is the correct title for married and unmarried women in business, unless she asks you to call her something else.

Finally, be sure to stand up when making an introduction and always offer your hand to shake. Research shows that people remember you longer and more favorably if you have shaken their hand. That is a win-win situation.

Verbal Communication

How you speak influences how others view you, so be sure to speak clearly and use proper grammar. If people have to strain to hear you, then you run the risk of being perceived as timid, which might make it harder for others to think of you as credible. On the other hand, if



everyone can hear you before they see you, you might be perceived as overbearing. Also, avoid slang at the office; there is no upside to being seen as hip in a legal environment. And, of course, don't use profanity, even if the attorneys regularly use foul language.

Master the art of the voicemail – you will be leaving a lot of them. Did you know that many voicemail systems transcribe voice messages into an email? Following a simple formula will help to ensure that you avoid leaving incoherent voicemails. The formula: state who you are; why you called; and how you can be reached. A brief call to action, stating what you want the listener to do, should be included in the "why you called" part. For instance, if you're calling your boss to give her an update on a

report, but you need more information to complete it, say so. Remember to enunciate clearly and to slow down when leaving your telephone number. No one has time to replay a voicemail message over and over to verify a phone number.

Email Etiquette

Read the firm's personnel manual cover to cover and be aware that your email account is not private and can be viewed by the firm at their discretion. What this means is that all of your work emails should be work-related.

Also, many emails are forwarded to upper management and clients without any editing, so make sure your emails can pass what I call the "Boss Test." First of all, commit to the habit of proofing every email that you write. The spellcheck feature doesn't catch all mistakes, such as the misuse of your/you're and they're/there/their. Next, be sure that the subject line is informative. Most people decide whether to read an email based on the subject line. Next, make sure the content is short and to the point, and use headers for clarity, if necessary. And, just like a voicemail that you may leave, include a brief call to action, stating what you want the reader to do, if anything.

In addition, never use the salutation "hey" and avoid emoticons and text speak as they are all too casual for professional

correspondence. Finally, never, ever vent, gossip, or make cultural or sexual references in a work email – not even to your friends or someone you trust. Once you press the send button, the email is forever out of your control.

Smartphones and Social Media

Going to a meeting? Leave your smartphone at your workstation. Also, while in the office, be sure to turn your smartphone off or put the ringer on silent. No one wants to hear the constant pings and beeps of your phone and you don't want to be known as the rude newbie who spends half the day checking text messages.

Also, don't let social media get you into trouble at work. Never tweet or post anything about your place of employment without prior permission. Unfortunate tweets such as "I hate my job," or "I don't want to go to work today" should never be posted. You might think your tweet or post is funny or harmless, but the firm might view it as a breach of confidence.

Grace Under Fire

Grace under fire is the ability to keep your cool under extreme stress. A paralegal who keeps her cool under pressure and gets the job done is the gold standard in leadership material. Put on your customer service best when dealing with stressed attorneys,

hair-raising deadlines, and upset clients. Working on solutions and not dwelling on obstacles will earn you a place in the firm's paralegal hall of fame.

Integrity

Finally, be kind to other paralegals and the staff. It's simple: no one likes the paralegal who is nice to the attorneys and treats everyone else poorly. Be a team player and give credit to those who help you and never throw a colleague under the bus when things go wrong, no matter how tempting. Word gets around fast who can and cannot be trusted. Be one of those paralegals who has earned the trust and goodwill of the other professionals in the office. Before you know it, one day a newbie will be looking at you juggling tough deadlines and situations with a smile, wondering,

"How does she do it?"

