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Here's Your Desk, There's the Restroom, and This Is a Salad Fork

WORKPLACE

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Etiquette lessons Help Ease Young Hires' Initiation Into the Business World

As more young folks head out of college and into power lunches and client dinners, senior executives have begun to realize that something is missing from their new employees' educational portfolios: table manners.

After all, keg parties, frat-house dinners and post-midnight pizza parties aren't typical corporate fare. What is important in the business world is impressing clients — or at least not making them ill with gross behavior. So some companies are sending their employees to etiquette class as part of the company's initial training or orientation.

Not long after Karen Guth started her first job out of college, as an assistant account executive for Vollmer Public Relations in Dallas, she was faced with the daunting task of taking a client to lunch. Without training and guidance, she said, she was a "nervous wreck."

But Guth was fortunate enough not to be flying solo — her supervisor was coming along, and "we went through things before we went out," she said. For one, she didn't know whether she should order expensive foods, or whether some foods, such as steak, weren't proper because they kept you chewing more than talking. The pressure heats up with client lunches and dinners, she said, because clients "kind of look to your lead."

That means your manners may be a deciding factor in a business transaction.

"Nobody wants to be around a rude clod," said Cynthia Lett, principal of the Lett Group, an etiquette training business based in Silver Spring. "People like to do big business with people they like," she said. A client isn't going

to be impressed if the company manager drinks out of the finger bowl at dinner.

Vollmer will introduce etiquette training during a "white-tablecloth lunch" at next month's company retreat, said Carolyn Levy, senior vice president. "It's not that we have a bunch of slob on our staff," she said. "It's that we're trying to give them a leg up on their careers."

Proper dining skills are a key to good business relations, Lett said. Her clients are often junior associates who were embarrassed when they accompanied senior partners to a client dinner and were told their table skills were appalling. She often trains younger clients because there are things they need to know that "were never taught in school."

That may be changing. College recruiting and career offices are starting to offer etiquette programs to complement students' degrees. The University of Dayton, the University of Virginia and Pennsylvania State University are among the schools now offering Dining Etiquette 101.

"We kept hearing again and again that {employers} are finding students who get a good education, but that extra polish, finesse was not" apparent, said Anne-Marie Welsh, manager of public information at Penn State's Erie campus.

So to help remedy that situation, the college renovated an 18th-century mansion on its campus about a year ago so professors could hold lectures and discussions during a formal dinner. Each lecture there includes 10 minutes of training on dining etiquette.

"Students are gaining confidence through knowledge about everything from how to make formal introductions to where to place name tags and when to put their napkins on their laps," Welsh said.

Kistra Lewis, 25, frequently takes clients to dinner. "If they had a workshop in school, I would have jumped on it," she said. As an account manager for Rainier Corp., an advertising, marketing and public relations firm in Princeton, Mass., she admits that business dining is difficult. "Most of the

people are older than I am," she said, but "it's part of learning business."

Lewis has given seminars on etiquette and says table rules are no joke, especially when she sees people who have been in the workplace for years "sticking a fork with food on it into a client's face and asking them if they want a bite. . . . talking with a mouth full of food. In some ways I appreciate seeing things like this because it creates such a vivid picture in my mind of what not to do."

Kim Zoller, president of **Image Dynamics** in Dallas, agrees. Her company holds seminars on business etiquette. Zoller started the company six years ago, after working in personnel doing job placement. **"I saw there were a lot of people who needed jobs, but they weren't getting them because of their soft skills," she said. "I have clients who take the people they are interviewing out for lunch, and if they don't know how to eat, they don't hire them."**

She mentioned that a man at a seminar recently started picking his teeth at dinner. **"I see these things daily," she said. "If anyone notices what they are doing, it reduces their trust level {and} their confidence level."** They lose respect for them, she said, and that leads to losing business.

Glen MacDonell, manager of sales development for the regional office of United Airlines in Sterling, said the fear of turning off prospective customers during meals is one of the reasons his department recently went through etiquette training for the first time.

"We have a lot of younger employees, so we thought it made good sense to get on the same page," he said, adding that he was motivated by questions from a younger employee about what to do at a client function. "It started with his needs, and we realized we all needed it," he said.

"We're selling a first-class product. We have to present ourselves as first-class sales people," MacDonell said. "The better we portray ourselves, the better we look to our customers."