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Casual attitudes can rankle at work

By *LESLIE A. PAPPAS*
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Dinette Rivera didn't expect to teach etiquette to the interns in her youth entrepreneurship program at the University of Delaware. That is, not until the director of the program came for a round of introductions, and one intern didn't bother to stand up. Then one day, an intern arrived for a client meeting dressed in a sharply pressed dress shirt, khakis -- and flip-flops.

"I don't know what he was thinking," said Rivera, 49, who took him into her office to explain "business casual" wasn't *that* laid back. "Kids anymore, they don't get this etiquette. ... They do these things that are totally improper but they don't see that they're doing anything wrong."

Office etiquette -- it sounds stodgy and old-fashioned, but when somebody crosses the line, it can become a serious matter.

"People don't realize how it affects their jobs," says Rosanna Mangini, founder of Leadership & Etiquette Dynamics, of Bear, who teaches courses on etiquette and offers office training programs in Delaware. "It might be why they haven't gotten a promotion. They've sabotaged themselves. They don't know what they don't know."

Many of today's office faux pas boil down to generational miscommunication, etiquette experts say.

The workplace is witnessing a new culture clash of generations as Generation Y -- aka the Millennials -- enter the work force. This new generation, the 70 million people born between 1977 and 1994, represents about 20 percent of the population, according to NAS Recruitment Communications, a human resource advertising and consulting firm headquartered in Cleveland.

As with any generation gap, the Millennials have values and characteristics that can put them at odds with earlier generations. But what is different with Millennials, say etiquette and human resource experts, is that they're bringing those differences into the office.

A NAS study in 2006 called "Generation Y: The Millennials, Ready or Not, Here They Come," identifies some common Generation Y attributes:

- They are blunt and expressive. Self-expression is favored over self-control.
- They are impatient. Technology and instant gratification dominated the world they grew up in.
- They are image-driven.
- They are technologically savvy.
- They are efficient multi-taskers.

These characteristics are challenging the rules of office etiquette.

Appropriate attire is often the first source of conflict.

Many in the Millennial generation see nothing wrong with showing up to the office in yoga pants and a hoodie, "because they're going to be at their desk all day, and they've got to be comfortable," says Gretchen Neels, an etiquette consultant and author of "Business Etiquette 101: 30 Absolutely Never-Evers for Business, Dining, and First Impressions."

"Comfort is a huge piece for these people. They live in a 24/7 world, and they don't have the demarcations" between work and home, she says. "People will say to me, 'They should know better,' And I say to them, 'Take that out of your vocabulary. They don't know.'"

Conflicts over dress have led workplaces all over the country to spend hours debating dress code minutiae, says Lynne Lancaster, co-founder of BridgeWorks, a Sonoma, Calif.-based company that does cross-generational training for businesses.

One company spent two years to come up with a five-page set of rules. Some of the arguments: Can a bra strap show? What kind of piercings are appropriate? And just how low below the hip bone should a person be allowed to wear their pants?

For tolerant, image-driven Millennials, dress code restrictions push buttons about individuality and self-expression. For their older counterparts, the lack of standards come off as rude and disrespectful. Finding common ground can be difficult.

"It touches on a lot of hot buttons" for each generation, says Lancaster. "People will say, 'Can't you respect my right not to see your underwear?' " Which then leads to the obvious question: "Does my right not to see your underwear trump your right to express yourself through your pants?"

The conflicts continue when it comes to communication styles, Lancaster says.

"Boomers want to always call a face-to-face meeting, and the Gen Xers are saying, 'Can't we just e-mail each other?' and the Millennials are saying, 'I already sent you a text message so I'm not coming to the meeting.' "

But behavior perceived across generational lines as rude is often rooted in work-based values -- such as efficiency and productivity -- that all generations may share.

Neels says many of her older clients are offended that their younger co-workers wear earbuds to listen to music and log onto MySpace. To Baby Boomers, the behavior sends the message that they don't want to interact with office colleagues, and they aren't really being productive.

But for plugged-in, multi-tasking Generation Y, the music may actually make them work better, says Neels.

"It's hard for them to have silence. I tell managers, 'Let them wear their iPods. They'll be more productive,' " Neels says. "To a Baby Boomer, I'll say, 'You need to work in complete silence because that's your generation. They're the opposite.' "

Still, etiquette experts hold out hope that the new generation will come around to the old ways.

"Etiquette is not outdated. It's needed more than ever," says Mangini, of Leadership Etiquette & Dynamics. "It's a global competition now. Manners are integral to your professional image."

Lancaster agrees.

"The best thing a Millennial could do for their career is sit back and study their new [office] culture and be adaptive, just as if you were going into any foreign country," Lancaster says. "It's just going to make them more successful."