

Students take a course in etiquette

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Did you know that statistics show you have only 30 seconds to make a good first impression? Did you know that sources indicate that success in getting, keeping and advancing in a job depends more on people skills and less on technical knowledge? Well, neither did we, which is why the Career Development Office at the University of Toronto law school decided to offer business etiquette training to our law students.

Whether you are a student of law, business or the arts or a budding doctor, these types of skills are becoming more important as this generation enters an increasingly competitive and diverse professional workplace. Understanding that workplace social events are really business development events, and that employer receptions are really job interviews dressed up in fancy clothes are critical to succeeding in the professional world.

"It takes a host of skills to be successful working in a profession. Once students move beyond their studies to work in a firm, or other organization, their ability to work well with colleagues and clients is critical. Understanding business etiquette or generally acceptable professional expectations is a very important part of that," says Stephanie Willson, director of professional growth and management at **McMillan Binch LLP**.

Etiquette training completes the circle of skills that students need. Young people work hard for their degrees, and this type of training is designed to prevent the star student from floundering at a business meal or failing miserably when confronted with making small talk with a firm partner or prospective client.

To deliver business etiquette training, we called in the experts. The Etiquette Advantage is a company that focuses on how manners can help build relationships and increase professionalism. Co-founders Lynne Waugh and Lisa Wright tell the students to focus on three basic areas: conversational skills, body language and grooming. Minor attention to each of these three areas will improve the first impression one makes.

There are a few simple and effective strategies to improve conversational skills. Students are encouraged to read the newspaper cover to cover on the day of a job fair, interview or social function, to provide them with easy conversation starters. The Etiquette Advantage consultants advise students not to be "close talkers," to respect personal space and that being a good listener means not talking. Lynne Waugh suggests a sure-fire way to start a casual conversation with a prospective employer is to ask an open-ended question such as "tell me about ..." or "how did you get involved in ...?" A student who attended one of our sessions remarked that "because I am quite shy, the small talk strategies are very useful."

Research also demonstrates that people react to your body language - your tone, posture, eye contact - well before they really hear what you are saying. Etiquette training forces students to remember to always shake hands, to introduce themselves by name, to make eye contact and to stand with confidence and poise.

The handshake is a peculiar convention requiring us to make physical bodily contact with a stranger. If done right, this odd ritual lets a student send a message of confidence and personability. Done wrong and the student can send a message of a domineering or weak nature. The Web site www.life-recipes.com offers 16 tips for creating the perfect handshake. If your religion prohibits you from shaking hands, be prepared to state that in a non-confrontational and positive manner.

Students in professional faculties should also remember that carving out a distinct look and identity does not justify a dishevelled or sloppy appearance. The etiquette consultants don't advise against individualism; they do advise against poor grooming and clothes that are sloppy or unkempt. No matter what your religious affiliation, or personal grooming policy, there is no excuse for messy hair, clothes that are too casual or excessive makeup at a job fair or other business-focused social event.

Students spend a great deal of time and money in pursuit of a professional career; without the tools of business etiquette, they risk turning people off and dissolving all their hard work.

"Your professional polish is on display no matter when or where the event. You are building a reputation, make it a good one," Wright says.

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