

# **Social Etiquette Guide**

**For Assessment Centres and  
networking events**

**Careers & Employability Service**

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If you attend a networking event or are invited to an assessment centre you may well encounter a buffet lunch or in some cases an evening dinner. Such events are an informal way for you to chat and to find out more about a company and its ethos and to make a positive lasting impression. Watch out though - social gaffs can seriously affect your chances of getting a job. Good conversation and manners are the most effective way of making a favourable impression and remember no one is born knowing which knife and fork to use!

## **CONVERSATION**

Being good at small talk is an impressive asset, it will create the impression that you are a relaxed and confident person and prospective employers will consider that you would be an excellent member of a team especially if your future role involves client contact. You can learn to be a good conversationalist by applying thought and preparation. Learning to listen will enable you to pick up on nuggets of conversation said by others so you can get or keep a conversation going.

### **What makes a good conversationalist?**

- Prompting - ask people about themselves, and ask open ended questions that are not answered with a simple yes or no
- Be curious – it is always pleasant to meet somebody who appears interested in who you are and what you have to say
- Ask intelligent questions and really listen to the answers
- Use positive body language – look at the person, lean forward slightly, nod or say 'I see' or 'yes'. If you are uncomfortable looking into the eyes of another person try the Cyclops approach of looking at a point immediately between their eyebrows – don't stare fixedly, shift your gaze occasionally.
- Avoid folding your arms as it appears you are not an open person, avoid slouching or standing to attention and keep your hands away from your hair and face
- The most common irritant in conversation is the interruption; if you have something to contribute, no matter how witty, wait for a pause
- No matter how disinterested you may be in what the other person is saying don't allow yourself to become distracted by what is happening elsewhere in the room; good manners often requires extra effort
- Always speak about yourself and your achievements with pride, never be apologetic about anything as self deprecation has a dampening effect on a conversation. How can the other person speak with enthusiasm and pride about their job, qualifications and achievements if you have just denigrated your own?
- A sense of humour is good to break the ice. Real life stories particularly about familiar and famous people are often better than jokes. What ever you do don't tell long shaggy dog jokes and **never** tell vulgar or sexually explicit jokes. Sarcasm and irony are fine so long as the object of the remarks is remote enough from the lives of those who are listening
- Try not to talk too quickly or too slowly

- Use good vocabulary without profanity, blasphemies or vulgarity. Don't introduce slang expressions that are obscure or offensive and don't pepper your conversation with obscure words, technical jargon or foreign phrases

### **Introductions**

If you are being introduced to someone first look at the introducer and then at the person you are meeting and if offered shake hands. Listen carefully to their name and repeat it in conversation as soon as possible to aid your remembering it.

If you are at a buffet and some one approaches you immediately give that person your full attention and fix their name in your mind by silently repeating it, if you are unsure ask them to repeat it. Listen for any nugget of information to hang a response on.

If you wish to approach someone do it from front so that the person can see you coming, avoid tapping their shoulder or theatrically clearing your throat. Say the other persons name if you know it, if not smile put out your hand and say 'hello I am .....' then add some information that will identify you and /or outline the reasons for presenting yourself.

If you want to get away you need to do this politely and take into account that all people need acknowledgment and closure with their dealings with others. It is rude to bolt or just say 'I have to go' and walk away; instead have a half empty glass so you can say: 'I think I'll go to the bar for a refill, it was nice speaking to you' or 'that food looks delicious, I think I'll try some'. If others have joined your conversation and it is not possible to say goodbye without interrupting things it is still important to make some kind of parting gesture, eye contact, a smile or a wave.

### **What to say**

Conversational clichés such as the weather or the news can be relied upon; after all they became clichés because they are so useful. Here are a few safe topics:

- Weather
- Current light news events
- A funny or light hearted film you have just seen
- A well known company merger, expansion or relocation
- The latest heroic or miserable showing of a sports team
- A great restaurant you have discovered
- Developments in a provocative court case or criminal investigation
- What band or singer or show is on tour and if it will be possible to get tickets
- Holidays – show interest in travel (it may be part of the job) but don't be so enthusiastic that you give the impression that once you have saved up enough money you intend to be off back packing round Australia!

### **What to avoid**

- Bad news such as aeroplane crashes
- Religion

- Politics and philosophy
- Your health or lack of it
- The faults or misfortunes of others
- Money – salaries and bonuses, cost of house etc

### **Don't be a bore**

Be prepared with questions and topics of conversation in mind -be an interesting guest and watch out for the boredom signals and if spotted change tack quick!

### **Watch out for these common signs of boredom**

- Your listener's eyes glaze over
- They look away or watch their shoes
- It occurs to you that you have been the only one speaking for the last few minutes
- You hear yourself using technical or obscure terms
- You notice that you are the only one laughing or even smiling at what you thought were the witty parts of your story
- You hear yourself repeating or rambling

### **The most important things to remember are:**

- To focus on the other person and keep the conversation going
- That you don't have to be witty, exhaustively well read or incredibly sophisticated to be a good conversationalist
- You need only be interested, considerate and a good listener

### **THE BUFFET**

This is a chance to mingle with your prospective employers and make small talk. Your main aim at this occasion is not to eat but rather to drift around and chat with lots of people; the food is merely a prop.

Avoid:

- Pushing in or swimming against the tide to speed your journey through the buffet table - be patient and wait in the queue along with everyone else. It is a time to chat and introduce yourself
- Using your fingers to put food on your plate – use the serving utensils
- Don't start eating whilst still in the queue
- Never pick up food unless you have a napkin or plate to hold it on and eat from
- Avoid putting too much food on your plate - going back for seconds or thirds is perfectly acceptable and allows you to mingle
- Never scrape and stack your plate when you're finished
- When you settle on a place to stand, make sure you are not blocking a path to the buffet table or toilets
- Try to eat your courses in some acceptable order. Although you may feel that it's perfectly fine to have prawns, salad and chocolate cake piled onto your plate all at once, others may find this eclectic mix unappetizing
- Turn off your mobile

## **FORMAL DINNER**

### **Table Settings**

- It is an easy mistake to use the wrong cutlery or wine glass so try to remember that drinks are placed to the right side of your place setting, salad and bread plates are placed to the left. Use the cutlery in the order in which you find it, working from the outside in towards your plate
- Once you have picked up a piece of cutlery never put it back on the table
- Avoid waving or thrusting your cutlery to emphasise a conversational point
- Your napkin belongs unfolded on your lap, don't elaborately flap or wave it when unfolding it
- If you leave the table put the napkin on your chair and push the chair close to the table
- Hold white wine glasses by the stem (to keep the wine cooler) and red wine glasses by the bowl (the warmth of your hand enhances the flavour of the wine)

### **General Decorum at the dinner table**

- Posture - sit up straight, avoid slouching and leaning or putting your elbows on the table
- If you take medication do so without comment, no explanation is necessary
- Keep all belongings such as keys, glasses, notebook off the table - If it isn't part of the meal it shouldn't be there; put your handbag and briefcase under your chair
- Never chew with your mouth open or gulp food down
- Don't speak with food in your mouth no matter how much you want to inject a brilliant observation at a critical moment in the conversation - be consoled by the fact that you have too much class to speak with food in your mouth!
- If eating bread first put a piece of butter on your plate, then break off a bite-size piece of bread and butter this eating one piece at a time. Don't butter an entire piece of bread or roll
- If you are asked to pass the salt or pepper, always keep the two together and set them down on the table within reach of the person making the request- don't pass them hand to hand
- People dining together should start and finish at roughly the same time so pace yourself so you are in sync as you don't want to finish ahead of everybody else or lag behind. If you find you have fallen behind, stop talking so you catch up
- Don't smoke at the table and if by some chance you are with smokers never ever use your plate as an ashtray but ask the waiter for one

### **Dining Accidents**

- If one happens - don't panic! Act calmly and if possible cheerfully
- If you spill something don't dramatise the incident by jumping up or yelling 'watch out'. If you are in danger of getting wet back away from the table and blot with a napkin

- If you spill something on someone else apologise calmly and then offer to pay for whatever cleaning is needed. Don't touch the other person, instead let the victim handle the blotting and /or wiping; offer your napkin and ask the waiter for replacements and don't make the incident the next topic of conversation but move on

You are now equipped to make the most of any social event without fear of standing out for all the wrong reasons. Learn to enjoy such events and remain relaxed, calm and confident at all times.

Good Luck!