

Professional Presence and Executive Etiquette Tips for Job Candidates’ Effectiveness During Employment Interview Meals

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In today’s competitive marketplace, employers are placing increasing importance on professional presence and related soft skills as they recruit and promote for effectiveness in their organizations. Prospective employers often incorporate a meal into the job interview process, realizing that employees who are comfortable and confident in their use of appropriate dining etiquette skills project a more positive image of their organization. This article presents essentials for mastering the two steps needed for acquiring executive dining etiquette skills: (1) identifying and understanding these skills and (2) practicing these guidelines in order to enhance professional and personal effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

The intangible quality known as professional presence is an integral component of success in today’s dynamic business environment. Developing professional presence and executive etiquette skills helps one to increase both personal and professional effectiveness in a variety of business arenas, including the job search process. Prospective employers commonly incorporate a meal—breakfast, lunch, or dinner—into their job interview process (Rosenthal, 2010), often because they anticipate that candidates who are hired will be dining with colleagues and clients of their company. Manners do indeed matter, and individuals who are confident about their mastery of essential dining etiquette skills can project a more positive image of their organization. “In the words of one Fortune 500 executive, ‘Eating is not an executive skill, . . . but it is especially hard to imagine why anyone negotiating a rise to the top would consider it possible to skip mastering the very simple requirements . . . what else did they skip learning?’” (Johnson, 1988-2006, as cited in Guffey & Loewy, 2016).

According to the Emily Post Institute (“Emily Post Quotations,” 2016), the “First Lady of Etiquette” captured the essence of professional presence and executive dining skills when she herself wrote: “Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use” (Manners section, para. 3).

Far from being a rigid list of dos and don’ts set in stone, executive etiquette is, above all, a matter of the heart—a genuine concern for the welfare and comfort of others. Why, then, have etiquette rules at all? Mastering etiquette guidelines gives job candidates confidence that they can manage the etiquette skills needed for appropriate dining at any meal in any situation. In particular, an employment interview meal requires dining etiquette skills that have been practiced until they have become second nature. Having confidence in one’s dining etiquette skills increases the likelihood that the job candidate will be more comfortable at an interview meal, conveying a positive impression to the interviewer. Acquiring these skills enables interviewees to devote full attention to the conversation and to their answers to questions

during the meal. Further, the candidate's confidence can put the interviewer more at ease, increasing the comfort level and effectiveness of the meal interview. Job candidates may not realize that interviewers, as well, can experience stress during employment interviews as they seek to recruit the right person for the job in a competitive marketplace (Knight, 2015). The security of the interviewers' position can depend ultimately on the quality of employees they hire. Thus, confidence and comfort in using proper dining etiquette can create a win-win situation in a business dining situation.

This article examines two steps needed for mastering executive dining etiquette skills: (1) the identification and learning of basic dining etiquette guidelines and (2) the crucial step of practicing these skills on a daily basis at every meal.

IDENTIFICATION AND LEARNING OF BASIC DINING ETIQUETTE GUIDELINES

In today's business world an increasing amount of business is conducted in meal settings (Cansler, n.d.). A number of reasons may be given for this increase, including economy of time in taking care of an item of business while eating a necessary, nutritious meal. In addition, a carefully selected restaurant may serve as a more relaxed venue than an office and can enhance the likelihood of reaching desired business outcomes. Anticipating that prospective employees who are hired will be entertaining clients and business executives in restaurants and in social situations where food is eaten, interviewers realize that the etiquette savvy of employees reflects upon the image of the company. A job candidate's manners can be the deciding factor in hiring for a position with several finalists of equal aptitude in today's competitive job market (Albright, 2008).

What sources of information should a job applicant consult in learning basic dining etiquette? Many universities offer courses or seminars to help students learn these fundamental guidelines. In addition to courses for undergraduate students, etiquette instructional and real-world practice sessions are often included in MBA and Executive MBA curricula (McDaniel, Bevill, McNeely, & Bevill Watson, 2014). Students and alumni should contact the career services department of their university to inquire about opportunities for individual coaching in business dining etiquette. Seminars may also be offered to the general public in person and online by entities such as the American Management Association (<http://www.amanet.org>) and The Emily Post Institute (<http://www.emilypost.com>). Many university websites offer a wealth of information online to guide job applicants as they prepare for an interview meal.

Books and online sites dedicated to the subject of business etiquette are a valuable resource in identifying basic dining guidelines. A number of etiquette books have been written from the perspective of businesspersons in describing contemporary etiquette rules. Two outstanding examples are *The Emily Post's Etiquette Advantage in Business: Personal Skills for Professional Success* (P. Post, A. Post, L., Post, & Senning, 2014) and *Emily Post's Manners in a Digital World: Living Well Online* (Senning, 2013). The website of the Emily Post Institute (<http://www.emilypost.com>) gives an abundance of links with comprehensive information about executive etiquette, including job interview dining.

Units on business etiquette can be incorporated into existing courses presented in the business curriculum, as this author does each semester in all classes, including Business Communications, Professional Business Development, Human Resource Management, Principles of Management, and Organizational Behavior. A number of practical, indispensable dining tips featured in these units designed for the success of job applicants are described in the following sections of this article. Etiquette guidelines are addressed in the chronological order in which they are likely to be needed during a business meal.

Preliminaries

Table and Place Settings

The napkin at a place setting is used for two purposes: to protect one's clothing while eating and (2) to dab, rather than wipe, one's mouth unobtrusively whenever needed. One should remove the napkin from the place setting, unfold it either fully or partially, and place it in the lap as soon as everyone is

seated and the host or hostess has removed his or her napkin from the table. At a buffet meal, one should remove the napkin from the table as soon as everyone begins to eat (“Napkin Etiquette,” 2015).

Place settings, of course, may vary greatly in different situations. In order to be confident in using the correct utensils, remember the general procedure is to use silverware beginning on the outside of the place setting and moving inward toward the plate. In a table setting the utensil placed horizontally above the dinner plate is used in eating dessert toward the end of the meal.

When a number of businesspersons are dining together at a meal and place settings are put in close proximity to each other—especially when each place setting includes multiple plates and glasses—the following mnemonic is helpful in determining which elements of the place setting belong to one’s own place setting. This acronym for guiding one’s use of the bread and butter plate, drinking glasses, salad plate, e.g., is SLLR; think of the pronunciation of the word “slur” /slər/, an indication that musical notes should be sung or played in a *smooth, flowing manner* (“Slur,” 2016). Likewise, remembering SLLR will help one to dine *smoothly*! The acronym SLLR represents “Solids to the Left; Liquids to the Right.” If a piece of china or glass holds solid food (e.g., a bread and butter plate), one’s bread and butter plate is located to the left of the dinner plate. If a piece of china or glass holds a liquid (e.g., water or iced tea), one’s glass is located to the right of the dinner plate.

Selection and Ordering of Food and Drink

Of primary importance in making food selections at a business meal is to order food that is easy to eat. Considering the natural tendency for many job candidates to be somewhat nervous during any job interview, interviewees should use discretion in selecting menu items. One should order foods that are healthful, while being easily manipulated during the meal. For example, individuals might wisely avoid items such as lasagna, soups, and foods with sauces; no one wants to “wear” remnants of the meal on his shirt or tie or on her blouse or scarf during the organization’s interview sessions conducted later that day. If an interviewer tells the interviewee in advance the name of the restaurant where the meal interview will be held, a job candidate should view the restaurant’s menu online to mentally select several tentative, easy-to-eat food items. If the interviewee is asked to order first and is in doubt about the menu selection to choose because of prices or the nature of many of the foods, the candidate may pleasantly respond, “Everything looks delicious—What would you suggest?” The interviewer’s answer will indicate a favorable price range or an appropriate selection if the candidate is unfamiliar with the menu items.

The beverage of choice at an employment interview meal is water; one may wish to ask for lemon or lime to add flavor. Water is regarded as the healthiest beverage; ordering it can be an indicator of one’s appreciation for healthy choices. If candidates prefer iced tea or a soft drink, they can drink these later at home. It is recommended that if a prospective employer offers candidates the opportunity to order an alcoholic beverage, they should gracefully decline, even if the employer orders an alcoholic beverage. Interviewees want to have full use of their faculties during the interview; an additional consideration is the possibility that the employer is offering the alcoholic beverage in order to see if candidates are inclined to accept (Farrar, n.d.). Candidates may decide to accept the offer of coffee if the opportunity is presented at the end of the meal. One should remember that three of the top qualities employers are seeking in a potential job candidate are professionalism, high energy, and confidence (Casserly, 2012). The ways in which job candidates demonstrate their dedication to a healthy lifestyle are positive indicators during an employment interview.

Etiquette During the Meal

Consideration of Others While Dining

The host of a business meal is the first individual to begin eating; job candidates should wait to start eating until after the host has taken the first bite of food. Job candidates should chew food with their mouth closed. The importance of this guideline can be easily understood if one stands a small mirror in front of the place setting while dining privately at home and watches oneself eating—often an enlightening experience! To avoid talking while chewing food can be especially challenging during a meal interview. Candidates must simply remember that waiting to answer a question is perfectly

acceptable when one is in the midst of eating and is immensely preferable to talking while chewing food. The candidate should take smaller bites of food when dining at an interview meal so that a delay in answering a question will not be prolonged. No apology is necessary; in fact, this brief pause may give the candidate an extra moment to consider a question before answering!

A cardinal rule for success in interviewing and a caveat to all job candidates: Candidates should turn off their cell phones during the entire interview process, including the interview meal. As one executive from ThinkEnergyGroup writes, “If you take calls during the meal, you can kiss the job offer goodbye” (“Why a Dinner Interview Can Make or Break You and What to Do to Succeed,” 2008).

Etiquette Toward the Close of the Meal

Placement of the Napkin When Leaving the Table

If individuals must leave the table during a meal, they should say only, “Please excuse me for a moment.” Then they should take the napkin from their lap and place it in loose folds on the left side of their dining plate; if room on the table is not available, individuals may place the napkin on their chair (EPI, 2014). By practicing this procedure smoothly, one can remove the napkin from the lap and place it on the table in a polished, unobtrusive manner. The same method is used immediately after the host places his/her napkin on the table to signal the end of the meal.

Etiquette Guidelines for Takeaway Food

In many dining situations, guests may take their remaining food home following a restaurant meal; one of the main exceptions is a business meal, where those who are dining should not take home leftover food. At a less formal occasion, when two business friends are sharing the bill, one may ask for a take-home box, but if one person is paying the bill for both diners, leftover food should not be taken home (EPI, 2012).

Placement of Silverware after Its Use

Once a piece of silverware has been used during the meal, it does not touch the table again; it may be leaned on a coaster or plate if necessary. For instance, a butter knife should be placed across the top of the bread and butter plate once it has been used, and a coffee spoon should be placed on the coffee cup saucer. When diners have finished eating, they should place all silverware they have used directly on the plate at the diagonal position of 10 o’clock and 4 o’clock, as if the plate were the face of a timepiece. Whether forks are placed with tines facing upward or downward is of no consequence; likewise, spoons and knives may be placed facing either upwards or downwards, and the direction of the cutting edge of the knife makes no difference. Servers will then know that they may remove a plate with no interruption of the conversation at the table (Snyder, 2006).

Etiquette Following the Meal

Payment of the Check

Job candidates should note that at an employment interview meal, the interviewer will take care of the cost of the meal; candidates should not offer to pay for their meal in this business venue. They should graciously express appreciation for the meal and for the interview experience to the interviewer after the host has indicated that the meal is ending.

This appreciation should be mentioned again in the handwritten thank-you note(s) that all job candidates should write immediately following an employment interview.

Thank-You Notes

Savvy candidates use the following routine to facilitate their writing of the thank-you notes—an action that can play a crucial role in the success of the job search process. Before leaving for the job interview, candidates should put (1) appropriate stationery or simple, folded thank-you note cards, (2) a black or blue ink pen, (3) the address of the site of the organization where they will be interviewed, and (4) first-class postage stamps on the table or desk where they ordinarily write at home. During the

interview process, candidates should make note of the name and position of each executive who interacts with them to a significant degree on that day. If correct spelling of names is needed, candidates may ask the professional assistant for this information while on site.

The first action taken after arriving home should be to go to the desk and write the thank-you notes (again, always by hand). After completing the notes, candidates should go directly to the local post office and mail the notes so that company executives and interviewers will receive them as soon as possible. This seemingly simple action can be a game changer in a business world where digital communication and neglect of personal finesse is the rule, rather than the exception. Several students have volunteered to this author that the executives who hired them told them that their handwritten thank-you notes were the tie-breaker in their selection over another similarly qualified candidate for their desired position. Candidates who need guidance in the composition of business thank-you notes will find a wealth of excellent examples in business etiquette sites online, such as The Emily Post Institute website (<http://www.emilypost.com>) and a multitude of university career services sites.

PRACTICE IN ACQUIRING DINING ETIQUETTE SKILLS

As presented in the Introduction to this article, practicing these basic etiquette dining skills at each meal on a daily basis, whether eating at home or in a restaurant, alone or in a group, is a crucial step in mastering these essential techniques. The familiar adage “Practice like you play” is well known to both student and professional athletes; this adage applies to any skill set in life, including professional presence and executive etiquette expertise.

Simply knowing basic guidelines for dining appropriately will not enable job candidates to attain their goal of dining with confidence while making themselves and others comfortable. Regular, *daily* practice is required. During a meal interview the candidate’s focus will naturally be on providing appropriate responses to the questions asked by the interviewer; the etiquette guidelines practiced and used by candidates every day will stand out, without fail. Legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi repeatedly emphasized the value of meticulous, consistent excellence in practice when he told his players, “The quality of a person’s life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor” (“Commitment,” 2016, para. 4).

The aforementioned suggestion for placing a small mirror on the table while eating alone is helpful in providing feedback as a job candidate aims for impeccability in practicing dining etiquette skills. When encountering a dining dilemma in which one is in doubt about the best etiquette protocol to follow, one should simply remember a cardinal criterion: Watch the host and follow that individual’s lead. During the process of acquiring professional presence and executive etiquette skills, individuals must be self-motivated, dedicated, and patient as they work to make these skills a matter of course. Change requires time, and job candidates should gently remind themselves whenever they err, of their successes and of the worth and the benefits of the skills they are striving to develop.

Given the international scope of the contemporary business arena, today’s job candidates should practice not only etiquette guidelines used in their own culture, but also etiquette customs used in the cultures of persons with whom they will likely be interacting, both in the job interview process and in the workplace. Practice of international etiquette should definitely include the area of dining etiquette. If research and practice time are necessarily limited before a dining occasion with individuals from different cultures, one may consult a website with basic information about dining guidelines used in a variety of cultures. Such websites often address a variety of helpful topics, including acceptable subjects for dining conversation, especially for “small talk” instigated by the host or interviewer, and different dining styles (e.g., Continental or American). Review and practice of international dining guidelines will add to the comfort of all individuals at the meal and project sensitivity and respect for persons of all cultures and backgrounds. Two especially valuable websites that can be used for this purpose are “The Web’s Leading Resource for International Business Etiquette, Manners, and Culture” (<http://www.cyborlink.com>) and “Cultural Etiquette Around the World” (http://www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural_etiquette/cultural_etiquette.htm).

CONCLUSION

A key to possessing the invaluable quality of professional presence is proficiency in dining skills for breakfast, lunch, and dinner meals in a variety of business settings, including employment interviews. Vital steps in acquiring these basic dining skills are first, to learn appropriate dining guidelines, and second, to practice these skills daily with dedication and determination. As job candidates learn and practice these skills, they will build a foundation for increasing their personal and professional effectiveness and social ease. In today's competitive business environment, professional presence and self-confidence in social skills equip job candidates with a genuine, sustainable competitive advantage.

The value of soft skills, such as dining etiquette in business, can hardly be overestimated. When all things are considered, the wellspring of true success in business, as in all aspects of life, continues to be a matter of intention to demonstrate sensibility for the well-being of others. Emily Post's descendents who span five generations and manage the Emily Post Institute recall the essential advice ("Emily Post Quotations," 2016) that the First Lady of Etiquette offered her readers in the early twentieth century: "Nothing is less important than which fork you use. Etiquette is the science of living. It embraces everything. It is ethics. It is honor" (Etiquette section, para.1).

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