

When using the right fork is serious business

Brian J. O'Connor, Detroit News Finance Editor 11:06 p.m. EDT July 3, 2015



(Photo: David Guralnick / The Detroit News)

In the business world, it's dog-eat-dog, so you'd better know where to find your fish fork.

No, not that one. That's your salad fork. And that one's your dinner fork. Not up there — that's the dessert fork.

OK, just let the waiter clear away your plate — along with any hope of getting that big job.

The "terror of forks" and the bewildering landscape of napkin placement are part of the final class of COM510 — "Communication Success Strategies" — at Walsh College in Troy. The class reviews the finer points of etiquette — and several basics — during a three-hour catered dinner and lecture that's required before students can join Walsh's MBA program.

This is the third time Walsh has offered the etiquette session, which is part of two required courses for MBA students, and the college isn't alone. Similar courses are offered at the business schools of Harvard, Cornell, Georgetown and others.

"They all offer dining etiquette because they recognize that it gives their students the edge," said Linda Hagan, chairwoman of the business communications department at Walsh. "It's how business is done, absolutely."

Nationally, businesses are becoming more concerned about making sure their job candidates and employees who deal with clients, vendors and the public know that their belt should match their shoes, that the salt and pepper are always passed together and that abbreviations that are OK in texting are simply incorrect for business emails.

"We really want our students to shine and stand out," Hagan added. "A lot of companies are going back to lunch or dinner interviews to make sure they are getting a well-groomed person."

Frequently, employers are impressed when job candidates can flout their technical or accounting chops, but not so much when an MBA grad confronts a stuffed pork chop. The prerequisite program also focuses heavily on communication skills, another weak area for many young people in business.

"We find from our employers that students are coming from everywhere without communication skills," said Jenny Tatsak, a Walsh professor of business communications.

Part of the reason that junior employees and grads need etiquette training may be a generally coarser culture, as well as changes in lifestyle and family makeup. As of 2013, more than one-eighth of all families in the country reported having dinner together just two nights a week or less.

"The makeup of our families is no longer mom and dad and kids at home," said Peter Post, managing director of the Emily Post Institute and co-author of "The Etiquette Advantage in Business" (and great-grandson of etiquette doyenne Emily Post). "Those kids may not be sitting down to that formal dinner that in the '50s and '60s was a staple of how people in the baby-boom generation learned these skills."

But with senior-level baby boomers retiring in the next few years, businesses want to make sure their younger executives can handle a client dinner, host a business lunch and write a pithy memo.

"We do a significant amount of business where we go in and teach those courses for three hours, including a meal," Post said. "Businesses recognize that their employees are going out to meet clients and suppliers and, while they may know their skills really well, they're not doing a good job of representing themselves."

As the students gathered, Nehal Kadry, who works for Dearborn Public Schools, already was clued into one of Hagan's pieces of business meal advice: Don't eat anything sloppy, such as corn on the cob.

"I'm concerned about the lasagna tonight," Kadry said.

Fortunately, the meal was a standard banquet-circuit chicken of the kind future MBAs will face at countless business conferences and awards banquets during their careers. The salad course did, however, contain the ticking time-bomb of cherry tomatoes, which, they were warned, must be gently speared to prevent part of your salad from being launched at a high-rolling client.

Hagan offered an entire buffet of useful tips. Think of the letters B-M-W to keep your plates and glassware straight: the bread on the left, the meal in the middle and the water to the right. Cover lemon slices with a hand before squeezing them into the iced tea to avoid an errant squirt.

Women should hang small purses (leave the monster handbags in the car) over their chairs, and develop a business card strategy at events that require pocketless dresses.

The future global business execs also heard that an overseas assignment might require them to adopt the continental approach to cutting meat, where the fork stays solidly in the left hand rather than the American method of constantly swapping it to the right. "This is a giveaway in the business world," Hagan noted.

"Mommy cutting," in which a diner slices up an entire serving of meat, is strictly *declassé*. Spooning soup away from you prevents drips on your tie. Don't pick up the bread plate or the soup bowl, and save *froufrou* drinks like *apuletinis* for a girls' night out. Even if it's stiflingly hot, men keep their suit jackets on unless the host removes his.

Finally, if you're getting the check, tip generously. "Nobody," Hagan warned, "likes a cheapskate."

For some students, the question of how to tell the red wine glass from the white wine glass will remain strictly theoretical for at least a while longer. That includes Carolyn Semrau, who handles contract pricing for a distributing company.

"I'm the low person on the totem pole at work," the Sterling Heights resident said. "I don't go anywhere."

boconnor@detroitnews.com

(313) 222-2145

Twitter: BrianOCTweet

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