

Rudeness

You go to the counter of the drugstore to hand over your prescription. The girl behind the counter is texting. After five seconds, without looking up, she takes your prescription with one hand. Meanwhile, her cell phone rings. She now talks in a loud voice with her mother or maybe an angry girlfriend. With her other hand, she types in your name on the computer. While talking to her mother, she prints your order form and slides it across to you. You take the form and go to the checkout. The girl just continues with her telephone conversation. The next customer slides his prescription across to her and she takes it, while continuing to talk. Is this multitasking or rudeness?

You are at a board meeting of your favorite foundation. A discussion is taking place between two board members about the date when the annual accounts must be ready. To your left and right, two other board members are e-mailing on their cell phones. The chair ends the discussion. He asks whether everyone agrees with the last viewpoint. The two people e-mailing briefly look up from their cell phones. They nod. Then they calmly continue e-mailing, their cell phones on their knees under the meeting table. Is this multitasking or rudeness?

An acquaintance told you that he and his wife were recently told off by their 25-year old son when his parents (in their early sixties) were both looking at Facebook while having a meal. I found that remarkable. My (apparently wrong) idea was that literally all young people are constantly looking at and communicating via every available screen and have no problems whatsoever with that. Only when you're over fifty, you have more manners. It seems that this is not set in stone. Some young people also find it irritating when people in their company continually live in a parallel world. On the other hand, I notice in myself a shift in opinion towards the opposite.

About five years ago, I was really bothered by people texting and e-mailing during a meeting. To be honest, I now sometimes do that myself, peering at a small screen during a meeting. So, the boundaries are becoming vaguer. Yet, very few people, no matter what age, would find it acceptable if they were talking one to one with someone and, during the conversation, the other person began consulting Facebook about something else entirely. The non-verbal communication is then: what you say or signify does not interest me in the slightest. Where does the boundary lie? And is that boundary in fact shifting? Is the effect stronger in groups? How should you deal with that in your board or board of directors?

The only solution is to discuss the matter. Put it on the agenda. List the opinions of everyone on the board or board of directors. If no one is bothered by it, fine. Don't fix it when it is not broken. However, even if there are just a handful of people who are indeed bothered, you will have to make serious agreements. After all, everyone in the meeting is there for each other and not for something else. On the other hand, hyper communication in our society is a fact of life. Keeping everyone happy is possible by, for instance, agreeing to allow for a short app or e-mail break of three or five minutes every hour. The chair must strictly monitor that no one is 'breaking the rule' in between. And if someone persists in doing so anyway? Throw that man or woman out of the board or board of directors because he or she is not sufficiently interested and/or has other priorities. That's absolutely fine, but not in your meeting. That is rudeness.



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