

Network to Work Meeting

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RESOURCE DOCUMENT – *RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE EXPRESSION*

Respectful Workplace Expression – Gender Identity

Workplace etiquette is about showing respect in the workplace. Nothing may be more personal than the way in which people refer to us through our name and pronouns. Using a person’s chosen name and desired pronouns is a form of mutual respect and basic courtesy.

In the workplace, employees usually have the option of articulating their **preferred name**, and the way they articulate this may vary -- formally vs. informally, in email vs. in-person meetings, on name badges and business cards, etc. For example, you may know someone with a birth name like Robert John Smith who prefers to be called RJ. Or someone who appears to be male but prefers to go by a female-sounding name such as Sarah.

But what about **pronouns**?

Gender pronouns (such as “he/him/his”, “she/her/hers” and “they/them/theirs”) are the way that we constantly refer to each other’s gender identity - except we often don’t think a whole lot about them. Usually we interpret or “read” a person’s gender based on their outward appearance and expression, and “assign” a pronoun based on our gender assumptions. But our reading may not be a correct interpretation of the gender with which this person identifies.

For most people their birth-assigned sex, their gender identity, their gender expression and how everyone else interprets their gender falls into alignment. However, this is not true for everyone. A culture that readily asks or provides pronouns is one committed to reducing the risk of disrespect or embarrassment for both parties.

Gender assumptions are made and fostered from birth – boy babies are dressed in blue, while girls are swaddled in pink; there are countless cultural and social norms like this that can be difficult to unlearn. We see someone who looks or dresses a particular way and assign a gender to them.

Gender identity, however, is internal – an internal *sense* of one’s gender. Many people identify as “**cisgender**” (i.e., male or female) because to them, their gender matches what was assigned at birth. Others are “**non-binary**” and don’t identify along the binary of either male or female (e.g. “him” or “her”). Some people identify as both masculine and feminine, or neither. A genderfluid, genderqueer or non-binary

identified person may prefer a gender-neutral pronoun such as the “they / them / theirs” (e.g. “I know Tom. They work in the Accounting Department”).

As gender identity is internal, we can’t necessarily know a person’s correct gender pronoun by looking at them and relying on traditional gender assumptions.

The concept of gender identity, gender fluidity and changing personal pronouns can be difficult for some to grasp and get used to, but this concept is rapidly shaping the workplace landscape. This means learning to move past our gender assumptions.

Everyone deserves to have their self-ascribed name and pronouns respected in the workplace; the experience of being misgendered can be hurtful, angering, and even distracting. Accidentally misgendering someone can be embarrassing for both parties, creating tension and leading to communication breakdowns across teams and with customers. Therefore, more and more people of all gender identities are choosing to clarify their pronouns in an email signature, on a name tag, etc. These cues are intended to help everyone in the workplace to be more conscious and intentional regarding our assumptions and about how we communicate with one another.

Respectful Workplace Expression - Terms of Endearment

Imagine this scenario. You’re having a typical workday doing your routine job responsibilities. Then, one of your colleagues who you don’t know very well asks for help with the copy machine. As a gesture of gratitude, they respond by saying “thanks, honey.” How would that make you feel?

For most individuals in the workplace, terms of endearment like “honey”, “sweetie”, “hon”, “darling”, etc. make them feel uncomfortable or offended. Others may chalk it up to regional or generational differences. This dilemma begs the question: are terms of endearment a form of workplace harassment? Or are they just a harmless way to express affection? Here’s what experts on workplace etiquette, ethics and labor law have to say.

Regardless of gender or the intent, many people find that terms of endearment are not appropriate for work. Most feel they should be reserved to express affection for a partner, friend or family member – and the experts agree. Rachel Holland, an authority on work etiquette and ethics, advises against using any terms of endearment in a professional setting.

Labor law attorney, Karen Michael, is of the same mind. **Not only can terms of endearment in the office show a lack of respect and condescension, but they can also have potential legal implications if they are deemed workplace harassment.** Instead, your safest bet is to call your colleagues by their first name and if you don’t know it, just ask.

The U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Civil Rights puts it best: **“Terms of endearment, such as calling a co-worker “honey”, “dear”, “sweetheart”, or some similar expression may constitute sexual harassment or discrimination. The effect [of the words] is the primary issue rather than the intent. Even if the person ‘means nothing to you’ or you have ‘used the term for years’, you should be aware that such expressions are inappropriate.”**

To help build positive and respectful workplace relationships with your colleagues and to avoid possible workplace harassment claims, avoid terms of endearment. Other off-limit topics include: a) your colleague’s clothing, behavior, or body; and b) yours or your colleague’s romantic relationships

If you’re not sure if something you want to say would be offensive to others or considered workplace harassment, it’s best to keep it to yourself. You could also use this similar rule of thumb: **if you wouldn’t say something to a coworker in front of your spouse or significant other, it’s probably better left unsaid.**

Adapted from:

“Are Terms of Endearment at the Office Considered Workplace Harassment?” October 11, 2018

<https://ezop.com/blog/water-cooler-talk/are-terms-of-endearment-considered-workplace-harassment/>

“Gender Diversity Etiquette: Ensuring a Respectful Workplace”. Aires Blog. By Kamryn Bohn and Lauren McKenna.

<https://blog.aires.com/gender-diversity-etiquette-ensuring-a-respectful-workplace>

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