



ALL THE WRONG SIGNALS:

How to Handle Personal Business without Hurting Your Image

By Suzanne Bates

Just today, I was setting up a time to meet with friends for dinner. What seemed efficient was to email my friend/colleague and my husband at the same time. The note came back from my friend, "5:30 sounds good, but it's pretty scary that you're emailing your husband!"

While her jab was lighthearted and fun, it reminded me how easy it is to send the wrong signal.

The reality of business life today is that with 24/7 communication and people working longer hours, business bleeds into our personal time. So it is virtually impossible not to allow personal business to bleed into the workplace.

We are working longer hours and yet all of us want to be sure we are there for our family and friends, and that we have a rich, fulfilling personal life.

The trouble is that the blurring of the boundaries can damage our professional image. If we send inappropriately personal emails, have personal phone conversations others can hear, fax a personal document and leave it in the bin by mistake, we are letting people into our personal lives and setting ourselves up for scrutiny.

While we may think we're keeping things humming along, we may unintentionally send signals like:

- My job doesn't come first
- I can't manage my time
- I am clueless about appropriate business/personal boundaries

Some bosses and co-workers might even think you're being disrespectful to your company by conducting personal business at work. It's easy to think "I'm here 10 hours a day; I have the right to spend some of that time doing personal things." But remember, many people have the tendency to focus on the negative rather than the positive. That is, others may not notice how long you're in the office. They'll only notice the unconstructive things you're doing while you're there.



Especially with the advent of the Internet, it's become easier and easier to conduct personal business at work. Paying bills, checking your kids' soccer schedules, looking up a recipe for dinner, etc... You may think you're "just doing this quickly," but be mindful of how long it actually takes, and who is watching.

Here are some tips to make sure you're not damaging your professional image by conducting personal business in the workplace:

- Close the door on a personal call, or take it outside on your cell phone. Don't subject others to personal conversations.
- If you do take a personal call, keep it short, and avoid any topic that would make others who hear you uncomfortable. No one in your office needs to hear your heated argument with your spouse or about your less-than-appealing health problem.
- Some companies have policies on personal email. Some are prohibiting it. Play by the rules and play it safe. Don't send it if you wouldn't want your boss to read it or if you wouldn't want it posted on the bulletin board.
- Be extremely judicious about faxing personal documents from your office. It's too easy to forget the original.
- Imagine you're the boss, and you're the one walking by someone's desk while they're filling out a mortgage application or creating a party invitation. How would you feel? Whenever you're tempted to do something like that at the office, give it the "boss" test, put yourself in their shoes, and then decide if it's really worth it.