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When Can You Make Personal Calls at Work?

By [Claire Suddath](#) on March 23, 2012

My mom is not allowed to call me at work. She has my office phone number, but I made her promise to reserve it for emergencies. Of course, her definition of “emergency” differs from mine, and over the years she has been known to call when she’s stuck in traffic, because she saw a baby bunny, and because someone stole a potted plant out of her front yard. I sit at a desk in the middle of an open newsroom, which means my co-workers can hear everything I say in response, such as “Aww, I like bunnies” or “What do you mean you filed a police report? Mom, it’s a plant.”

She usually dials my cell phone—which I always let go to voicemail—but every once in a while she’ll slip up and call my desk. Luckily, I’ve managed to convince her that my place of employment is too sophisticated and professional to allow phone calls about bunnies, and she’s promised to stop. According to manners expert Thomas P. Farley, author of *Modern Manners: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Social Graces*, I’ve done the right thing.

“Personal calls are a fact of life,” Farley says, “but you need to look at how your actions affect the people around you. If you’re in a space where you can hear every word of a conversation that your office mates have (and vice versa), you really want to limit personal conversations. If you can, eliminate them entirely.”

Eliminate them entirely? That can’t be necessary. When you work long hours, sometimes your personal life seeps into your professional duties because there isn’t enough time in the day to keep them separate. Personal calls can’t really be that invasive. Can they?

As it turns out, they can. I asked people for their opinions on personal calls and received a flood of responses—often written with several exclamation points on the end—about unnamed offenders who used their work phones to discuss intimate details of their personal lives. Erin Saunders, 30, works in an accounting office in Salt Lake City and used to have a co-worker who screamed at her school-aged children over her work phone. Toni Schnieder, 29, regularly suffers through a colleague’s analysis of her relationship with her boyfriend. Megan Wolf, 29, in Manchester, U.K., even had a co-worker promise her husband a good time if they dressed up in Sonny and Cher costumes.

When Leslie Carroll, 29, worked as a receptionist at a San Francisco art gallery, a co-worker’s ex-wife called the gallery’s main line all the time. “Once I answered the phone when she called, and I heard her yelling at her kids, ‘Eat your maple syrup! Sit down and eat your maple syrup!’” she recalls. Carroll doesn’t think the woman realized she’d picked up the phone. “I still can’t imagine a situation in which you’d be that angry at your kids for not eating maple syrup,” she says.

Most incidents occur when employees work in open areas together. But if you have a personal office, don’t think that if you close the door no one will be the wiser. “Then it’s less a case of disturbing people and more

about not frittering your day away—or appearing to,” says Farley. The same effect is achieved with cell phone calls, he says. While people may appreciate your attempted discretion, “we all know why you’re over there, talking on your cell phone in the corner.”

But there can be benefits of receiving a call from home in front of your colleagues. Abi Paul, now 34, found this out when he got his first job out of college. It was 2000, and he worked at a now-defunct Internet startup in upstate New York that had only one phone line for its staff of 10. “One day over the intercom, I hear ‘Abi, your mom is calling. She wants to know why the dishwasher isn’t working,’” he says. Everyone around him laughed.

Paul didn’t know anyone in the office yet and became incredibly embarrassed. “But actually, it broke the ice,” he admits. Without knowing it, his mom had actually helped him make friends more quickly.

For this article, I told my mother that just this once she could call me at work to ask me anything she wanted. On Tuesday afternoon, she took me up on the offer.

“I tried to download a bunch of photos to my computer the other day, but my laptop told me they were videos. How do I tell my iPhone to stop taking videos?” my mother asked. She was sitting in her parked car when she called, waiting on a takeout order. I walked her through the steps as quietly as I could—“See the slide bar thing? No, that’s your photo album. Click on the—yes, now switch it from the thing that looks like a video camera to the thing that looks like a regular camera.”— and wondered if anyone was listening. They all stared glassy-eyed at their computers and gave no indication that they’d heard me.

After I answered my mom’s question, I promised her a real conversation later, after work. “OK. Have a good day, sweetie,” she told me. “Oops, I just took a picture of my steering wheel.”

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