

Chatterbox #330 – Office etiquette (ad free)

Episode description

In this episode of Chatterbox, Andrew and Anna discuss the important topic of office etiquette. They share tips and opinions on workplace culture, including dress codes, handling awkward situations, and maintaining a harmonious office environment. You'll also hear about how cultural differences influence workplace behavior and why certain habits, like strong perfumes or noisy eating, might cause friction in shared spaces.

Fun fact

Casual Fridays, sometimes called Dress-Down Fridays, began in the 1960s in Hawaii with "Aloha Fridays." Hawaiian businesses encouraged employees to wear Aloha shirts (bright, patterned, and casual) at the end of the workweek. The idea was to promote Hawaiian culture and add a relaxed, island vibe to the office environment. This trend caught on in the mainland U.S. during the 1990s, thanks to marketing efforts by clothing brands like Levi Strauss, who saw an opportunity to sell more business-casual clothing.

Expressions included in the study guide

- Quote unquote
- To draw the line
- Behind the times
- Double standard
- To go over someone's head
- Desperate times call for desperate



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Chatterbox 330. "Office etiquette." Featuring Andrew and Anna. We're going to talk today about office etiquette. Things like how to dress for work, how to handle tricky situations like strong smells or awkward conversations, and about how workplace culture affects employee well-being. It's a topic that I think many of you will be able to relate to and I hope you'll enjoy this conversation. I know I sure did.

And joining me now to talk about office etiquette is my co-host, Anna. Hey there Anna, how are you today?

Anna: Hi Andrew, I'm fine. How are you?

Andrew: I am doing very well and Anna, I think you are a great person to talk about this topic with because you actually are the host of a business English podcast and maybe some of our listeners don't know about your other podcast but why don't I give you a second here to promo it, Anna. Because I think listeners who are interested in office etiquette might be also interested in business English. Do you want to give yourself a shout out?

Anna: Sure, thank you so much. My podcast is called Confident Business English. And if you're listening to this and you are a senior manager and you work in a company and you have to work with different people around the world, maybe native speakers in the UK. Or maybe you just have to speak English in your workplace environment, my podcast is all about helping you to feel more confident and more comfortable with some of the most common interactions. So yeah, absolutely if you're interested in etiquette, you might be interested in some of those episodes as well. And they're pretty short, they're only 13 minutes so they can squeeze in around your busy schedule as well.

Andrew: Very good, OK. So, guys. check out Anna's podcast for more lessons about business English. But today, you know our topic is related to the office and indirectly to business, but it's more just like a conversation about some office etiquette, some do's and don'ts that we've noticed from our lives as working people. And just things that we hear our friends talk about and sometimes get attention in the media. And Anna, we have just a bunch of different questions that we're going to toss back and forth and share our opinions and our thoughts about. And so, I thought we could start this conversation off, actually, by talking about clothing. I'm curious what your thoughts on wearing casual clothing in a professional office are. So, think about if you go, I don't know maybe to the doctor's office or the dentist's office or maybe to a law office or a government office. You know, those are professional situations, professional offices, but from time to time we can see some people wearing casual clothing. Maybe in the summer wearing some shorts or some sandals. The type of clothes that you wouldn't necessarily think are **quote unquote** professional clothes. So, what do you think about that?

Anna: I think the problem is casual clothing is so vague, and so subjective. Because for me casual clothing could be something totally different to what you're thinking in your head about casual clothing. I think it depends. I think that it's changed a lot over recent years. For example, in my case, because I work online, even though I work online I like to wear smart casual. I think that's probably the best way to describe it. I'm not super smart. So, I'm not wearing a suit or maybe a trouser and a jacket or a very very nice dress for example which some people might wear to work. But I do like to be smart casual.

And for example, when I work in the company here in Spain, they do have a rule about this, and they say the only things that you can't wear are trainers or jeans. You can wear anything else but not trainers or jeans. Now I think that's a little bit **behind the times** because I think jeans can actually look quite smart. It depends what you put them with, right? If you put them with a football t-shirt, then yeah OK maybe not. But if you put it with a blazer and a shirt, it can look quite nice. It's very hard **to draw the line**. And I think that's what a lot of companies have problems with. It's like some people's definition of casual are

flip-flops and shorts. I personally wouldn't be going into work with flip-flops or sandals. That being said, I'm not sure sandals for me at work. It's a no-go. It's a no-go for me. What about you, Andrew?

Andrew: Well, Anna, before I answer, I just wanted to back up for a moment and circle back to that word that you just used to describe clothing, “smart.” Smart clothing. Because in a North American context, we use this word “smart” to describe intelligent people, right? Like you do really well at school, you get straight A's, you're a smart student. But in the UK, it can mean intelligent, but it also has this other meaning. Maybe you could shed some light on that for us. What does “smart” mean in the context of describing an outfit or someone's appearance in UK English?

Anna: “Smart” can mean essentially elegant, I guess, or a little bit more formal. And the phrase that I used there was “smart casual.” So that's that really nice mix between wearing casual clothes but making it look a little bit smarter, a little bit more elegant, if you're going into work, for example. If I were going to give you a reference, maybe I would say some tech companies and a lot of start-ups have this sort of smart casual feeling. It's casual because maybe they wear jeans. But maybe they'll wear a shirt as well. So, I would describe that as smart casual. And that's definitely my work style, I would say. But then there are other places, like in more formal institutions like banks, for example, where still the dress code is shirt, tie, trousers, blazers for men. And women also wear very smart clothes as well. So, it really depends, I think, also what sector and industry that you work in as to what clothing is best for that particular industry.

Andrew: OK, so in North America it sounds like what you call “smart casual” we call “business casual.” Business casual. My definition, like you mentioned Anna, it's really hard to pin down and say this is exactly what business casual is or this is exactly what professional is. Or maybe even that term casual. That's the hardest one to pin down. But in my brain, business casual means maybe a shirt with a collar. You know, it doesn't have to be a dress shirt with a tie, but maybe a polo shirt or, yeah, some shirt with a collar. For whatever reason, the collar adds a little flair of business professionalism in my opinion.

And then for pants, and I'm just talking guys fashion here because I really have no idea about women's fashion at all, but for guys, I would think maybe a pair of chino pants or maybe some jeans. Like it depends really if your jeans are well fitted, if they're not super loose or baggy or torn. But if they're neat and they fit well, then I think jeans are probably acceptable. And then, yeah, for footwear, you know, I think even in a business casual setting sometimes a pair of sneakers or a pair of running shoes can be OK. But they have to be clean and hopefully not smelly, right? Like if you have this old ratty pair of shoes, then obviously that's not going to be good. Everything needs to be neat and tidy. But for example, a pair of Nike shoes or a pair of Vans, you know, if they're neat and clean, that can work in a business setting. But definitely, you know, when you mentioned shorts or flip-flops, to me that goes out of business casual or even casual. That's like beachwear, right? You wear that to the beach.

But I have to say, Anna, I wanted to get your opinion about this, and maybe this is a slightly controversial statement to say. But this last summer we had a heatwave here in South Korea. And so, it was really, really hot all summer long. And when I did have to go into the office during the summer, it was super uncomfortable because it's so hot. And I do have to walk for around a kilometer to get from the nearest subway station to my office. So that one-kilometer walk, even though it only takes about 15 minutes, is deadly in the summer. And I actually started taking a pair of clothes with me. Like I was like, I'm just wearing shorts and a t-shirt to get to the office. And then when I get there, I'll change into my business casual clothing. Because otherwise I just would arrive at the office drenched in sweat. So, I started doing that. I noticed that all of the guys in my work environment, their definition of business casual always includes pants. Nobody would be wearing shorts. Nobody would be wearing sandals. But I have to say I was a little bit jealous of the ladies. Because I noticed they could get away with wearing a skirt and, you know, getting some more airflow. And also, a lot of them would wear open-toed shoes or sandals. Which again, I think is a lot fresher, probably, in the summer, right? A lot cooler, right, in the hot summer weather. So, I don't know. Do you think there is a bit of a **double standard**? Where like guys have to wear more uncomfortable clothing just because of society's expectations? Like guys' legs and feet are disgusting, so we must cover them up?

Anna: I think you raise an interesting point. And I can't disagree with what you're saying. It is true I think that if you're able to wear a skirt and sandals, then you do have more options than if you can only wear trousers. Of course, I can sympathize with that. Definitely. And I think for me, for example, I never actually wear dresses or skirts. Very rarely. I always wear trousers anyway. So, I'm on your side, actually, with this. But the summer is the worst time. I can imagine that walk. Because here in Spain, it gets really, really hot in summer as well. And just being outside is horrible. And so, working in that type of heat is just awful. But I don't think I've seen any of the teachers go to the office in flip-flops. 'Cause like you said, I totally agree. Beachwear is absolutely a no-go for flip-flops. But there have been times when teachers would come in during the summer. And you'd be like, "Whoa, are you going out or teaching a class?" So, I think sometimes in the summer, because it's hot and things like this, the dress code gets a little bit more relaxed, let's say. But I think there are more options if you can wear a dress and sandals. Which, maybe, Andrew, you might not be very excited about wearing, I imagine. Maybe. You never know.

Andrew: You know what? Nobody has ever told me I can't. So maybe that's on me. Anna, I have one more clothing-related question here before we move on to our next topic. And that is, about, maybe, coming to work or leaving work in exercise clothes. Like, imagine you were a bike commuter. And you cycled to the office. And then you had to go into your office, into your workplace, maybe clean up in the bathroom, and change your clothes. And then get started with your workday. Or, similarly, at the end of the day, maybe you had a yoga class right after work. And you didn't have time to go home. And so, you just got into your yoga clothes and left the office. Do you think that's a professional thing to do? Or is that a little weird? Do you have an opinion about that?

Anna: I think you've got to do what you've got to do. I mean, I used to go to the gym every single morning before I would go to work. Because we had a gym in our office building. I mean, you really can't get any better than that. So, you would just go down to the gym, which was in the basement. I would shower in the gym and then I would go to work. But sometimes, I would go to work and then I would go to the gym. So, I would get changed at work and then go down to the gym. But, yeah, I think it's totally fine. I mean, look, people

have to make the most of the day when they can work out, right? If the only time they can work out is in the morning cycling to the office, then I think, yeah, great. And I think more businesses should have that available where you can go to work and have a shower, for example. I know some offices have this.

But, yeah, I really think that's a good thing. 'Cause if you want to encourage people to do exercise and be fit and healthy, which, by the way, I think is something that businesses and companies should do. It doesn't mean that people have to do it. But I think it's something that should be encouraged and promoted. And, if you're going to promote that, then you should allow people to have showers and things like this. So, I think that is important. So, yeah. For me, do what you got to do. If you need to go to work in your workout kit and get changed there, then go for it. I don't think there's any problem with that whatsoever. Of course, maybe not wearing it in a meeting with a client. But as long as you get changed, there's no problem.

Andrew: Yeah, you better hope that you're not late for your client meeting with your bike tights on. That's for sure.

Anna: Unless, unless you are, of course, selling bikes to a client of bikes or something like this. I mean this is the thing. It depends on the sector, right? I mean if you're a sports person and you're selling something like sportswear, then you're probably going to want to wear sportswear. But I guess in, let's say, the typical office environment that we're imagining, yeah, you might want to get changed before that meeting.

Andrew: But I'm in full agreement with you that offices having fully equipped change rooms and maybe even exercise facilities, like gyms for their employees, that's awesome. That would really make me want to work for that company if I could do that there. And yeah, if it was free and I didn't have to pay for a gym pass. Seems like a lot of upsides for companies to do that. So yeah, I totally agree.

OK, let's move on to our next topic, Anna. And I wanted to talk about smells. Smells in the workplace. Maybe not the most pleasant topic. But the first question I had for you is what's your opinion on strong-smelling foods in the lunchroom at the office?

Anna: Goodness, this is a controversial topic. And I think, just for some context as well, the reason why this is more important, maybe let's say in a British working environment than a Spanish working environment, is because in Spain, it's not very common for people to eat food, I would say, at their desk. Sometimes people bring food to the office, that's true. But often people might go out for lunch. But in the UK, especially in my experience anyway, when I worked there, it's quite common to bring your lunch to work and then eat your lunch at your desk. Which actually, in reflection, I mean I used to do this, but it's kind of gross really to sort of eat lunch at your desk. Anyway, I think it should be banned. Any strong-smelling foods. Now, I'm talking here about fish. Anything fish from the night before bringing it in. I remember there was one woman in my old office that used to bring like kippers to work. If you haven't heard of that, guys, it's like a very strong-smelling fish. And she would literally open the box and the whole office would fill with this thick fish smell. You're like, "Could you maybe take that into the cafeteria or the lunch space at least so it's not sort of ingrained in my nostrils?" So yes, I do think there has to be some etiquette around strong-smelling foods in the office. Especially fish and egg. Those are my two things where I **draw the line**. What about you, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah, I completely agree. We have to consider other people, right? We have to consider other people. It might be delicious to us, but if it does have a strong odor, then yeah, not so good. In a Canadian context, I remember taking my lunch to work all the time. Like this was a very common thing for me to take a lunch to work. But usually, all of the places that I worked had a lunchroom. So, you wouldn't be sitting at your desk. There would be a place that you could go where we'd have tables set up and microwaves and fridges. And that's a whole other set of issues. Because there's people who are like stealing food out of the fridges and stealing other people's snacks or lunch or something. Thankfully, I never had that problem. But that's something that I heard, some of the office gossip, right? It's like, "Where's my chocolate milk?" Or something like that. But yeah, I think we just have to be mindful about other people. I would be embarrassed to, like, gross other people out with the food that I eat. So, if I did bring a lunch that I thought may even have the slightest possibility of upsetting somebody else, you know, I'd always open the

windows before I use the microwave, for example. Or I'd try to eat maybe outside instead of inside if the weather was OK. This is a no-brainer to me. That we should consider other people. And yeah, not bring a really strong-smelling food.

Here in Korea, every workplace is different. I don't want to speak for all workplaces. But in the ones that I'm familiar with, we always had a cafeteria for staff so that we could just use the cafeteria. And I think a lot of companies have that. Or yeah, sometimes people go out for lunch. But I'm sure there are many people who bring a lunch with them as well. That's probably not uncommon. But I do think here in a Korean context, is that a lot of people are eating Korean food, right? Like everyday Korean food. And so, when it's like, I think, a food from your culture, you're maybe more open-minded to it. But when it's a food that you don't eat at home, and it's maybe somebody else's ethnic food, then maybe that's when some problems arise too. Like, I don't know, but I could see that happening as well. So yeah, those are the two contexts that I'm familiar with. And at least for me, I just try to not upset other people with my lunch.

Anna: Yeah, I mean on the flip side, other people could say, if we look at the other perspective, they'll be like, "Well, if I want to bring an egg sandwich to work, I'm gonna bring an egg sandwich to work, and you can deal with it." So, I guess there's the other perspective as well, of people who are just like, "You know what, get over it. It's just a little egg. It's just a little fish. You're gonna survive. You're gonna live. So, whatever, I can bring whatever I want to work." Which is true. You can bring whatever food you want to work. But that doesn't mean other people are gonna like it. And I certainly won't if you start eating your egg mayonnaise sandwich next to me. It's like, for example, I guess if we take it one step further. It's like if somebody starts eating an egg mayo sandwich in the middle of the metro. Wow, that would be another level.

Andrew: It's just so horribly rude to me. Any activity that imposes on other people when we're in a shared space. Right? You can eat whatever you want in your home. You can do whatever you want in your home. I don't care, as long as you're not breaking any laws. Go for it, do whatever you like. But then, when it's a shared space, we have to find some

common ground. And that means no offensive odors. So, anything like that just drives me crazy when people impose their will on me.

So, Anna, I also wanted to ask you, this is related, keeping on our scent topic here. How do you feel about strong perfumes or strong colognes? Actually, in a Canadian context, many, many companies—this is pretty ubiquitous these days—I think. “Ubiquitous” means all over the place. So, it's very common. Many offices, many companies, have banned scents. So, there'll be a sign maybe at the front door of the company saying, “This is a scent-free zone.” And what that means is that you're not allowed to wear strong perfumes or strong colognes in the office, because it can cause other people headaches, and some people have allergies to different scents. And, I guess it's the same opinion about smelly food, is that if you have a very strong scent, and you are bombarding other people's noses with your strong scent, then that just doesn't make for a nice shared environment. So yeah, although perfume and cologne are designed to smell good, not smell bad, at the end of the day, if you do get headaches or if you do have an allergy to these kinds of scents, then it could be difficult for you. But I don't know, is Europe like that? In the UK and in Spain, do you have scent-free zones? Or is this a Canada-only thing?

Anna: I mean, good grief. What perfumes are you wearing in Canada? I don't know what these strong smells are, but my goodness, maybe it's something that we're missing out on over here. This is the first time I've ever heard of anything like that. And maybe it's because I've never worked there. Maybe it's already a thing in some other places. But I have never in my life heard of a scent-free office. And I don't know, how would you determine that? Like, do you go around sniffing people and then say, “Oh, too much, too heavy today. You're gonna have to go back, Margaret, have a shower, take off the perfume, and come back in.” How would you even measure that? But... and the biggest question I have in my head is, what is this perfume that's causing people headaches? Because normally, like you said, perfume is a nice thing. It's a nice compliment. You know, I like wearing perfume every day, for example. I think it's a nice way to express part of your personality as well. But of course, I mean, if you're lathering yourself in Chanel No. 5 and

then going into the office, maybe it could be a little bit annoying. But good grief, I don't know what these perfumes are and these aftershaves that people are wearing.

Andrew: Yeah, I have to say I am pretty sensitive to scent like that. Like, if somebody really puts on a lot of perfume, it will cause me to have a headache pretty quickly. Like, one thing that I hate doing is going into a department store. Here in Korea at least, and actually in Canada as well, many of the first floors of department stores have the makeup and the perfume and everything. And here in Korea, when you walk into the department store, there are always people giving out samples of the different scents. And my wife loves this. She loves getting the samples, and she's always trying them out and sort of putting them in my face. Like, "Smell this one. Don't you like this one?" And I'm always like, "Ah!" It almost instantly gives me a headache. And I rarely, rarely get headaches, so this is one of my only triggers for this kind of thing. But maybe just because I'm sensitive to scents in this way, I think it's not such a bad idea.

But also, my wife likes to wear perfume, and when she does it very gently, I think it's fine. So, it's probably all about self-control and knowing when you're going over the top, right? Like you said, don't douse yourself in Chanel No. 5, but a spritz or two is probably OK. So, I think maybe this is one of those things we should leave up to adults to like be in control of. But I guess somewhere along the line, somebody really messed things up for everyone.

Anna: Yeah, for me, it seems a little bit over the top to... to have a scent-free office. Because humans just have scents. It's normal. And it's also been something that people have done for years and years, and thousands of years, is to wear perfume. Maybe even since humanity started, who knows? I don't know the history exactly of perfume, but for me, it's different than the smelly foods. Look, I'd much rather smell some perfume than egg, so I'm always going to be in that category. But sure, if you get headaches easily, that would be a little bit annoying. I guess this is an awkward conversation that you might have to have with a colleague. If you're sat next to them at work and they're wearing a lot of perfume and it's giving you a headache, these are some of the awkward conversations that have to be had at work. Or maybe it's somebody that doesn't smell very nice. They

have body odor, and you have to talk to them about that. So, these are some of the awkward conversations that have to come up at work sometimes.

Andrew: When you transition to a no-scent zone, maybe you'd get the opposite unintended side effect of having some stinky colleagues, right? That could be even worse. Be careful about what you wish for.

Anna: Talking about awkward conversations, I wonder if I could ask you about something else, Andrew. Let me set the scene then guys. And imagine that you are working in your company. You're working with your team, but you have a really big problem with your boss. You don't feel that they're listening to you. You're not getting on very well, and you think that they're doing something wrong. And you're kind of at a bit of a dead end. You don't really know what to do about it. The question is, and this is the question I pose to you, Andrew. How do you feel about **going over your boss's head**? And by this, guys what I mean going to the next person in the hierarchy, the next position up. How would you feel about doing that if there was a problem with your boss? If there was a disagreement with them and you didn't feel that you could talk to them? Is it ever acceptable **to go over your boss's head**? And if so, when? Question for you, Andrew. What do you think?

Andrew: To an extent, I think it is case by case. It would depend on the situation. But me, personally, I avoid conflict as much as possible. And this kind of situation really makes me uncomfortable. I think we have a chain of command. We call it a chain of command in English, which probably comes from the military or maybe the police. You know, where maybe at the bottom, you have just your regular, everyday patrol police officer. Maybe the traffic cop, right? Like, traffic cop is usually the bottom-level police officer. Then you go up. You have, I don't know, all of the ranks—the sergeant and the major and the general. Maybe that's... I'm switching from police vocabulary here to military vocabulary. But I hope you guys get the imagery, is that we have this chain of command in terms of how much power someone has in an organization. And to me, I always try to follow the chain of command. I'm a really firm believer in clear communication and expressing when you have

a problem. And if I had a problem with a boss or a manager, I would try to confront them and talk about it. And try to find a resolution. I'm usually not one of those people that gets petty and wants to cause problems.

Not very often do people really want to be at the office, right? This is not humans' default mindset, is like I wake up and think, "I want to wake up today, go to the office, spend all day working hard, and then finish at the end of the day and have no energy to do the things I want to do." Like when I wake up in the morning, my natural feeling is like I want to go outside. I want to go for a hike. I want to spend time with my friends or family. Right? So, having to go to work, although we do find fulfillment in it, and I am fulfilled in my employment, don't get me wrong, but it's still not like our default mindset. So, I want to try and make it as pleasant as possible. Because in reality, it's not like the first choice of how I want to spend my time. So that means I want to have a good relationship with my co-workers, a good relationship with my superiors, my bosses, and my managers. And if there is an issue, I'm going to try my best to resolve it. Because if it's not resolved, then I'm going to have a bad time at work, and that's just going to make me miserable.

So, at first, I would just follow the chain of command. I would talk to my immediate boss, try to resolve things. However, if there were an issue and I wasn't able to resolve it with my boss, then I would follow the next step. Which is probably going to the human resources office, right? And the human resources office is often a mediator in between employees and the management. And hopefully, they would have some advice or suggestions about what to do. But I wouldn't immediately go to my boss's boss and talk behind their back and try and get my boss in trouble. It would have to be a very, very extreme situation. I don't want to jeopardize anybody's career or get anybody else in trouble. Anything like that. So, yeah, I would follow the chain of command. Maybe I'm too much of a goody two shoes. I don't know. But Anna, how about you? What are your thoughts about this?

Anna: It's really complicated. Because fortunately, I've never been in a situation where I've had a difficult relationship with my boss. All my bosses actually have been great. I haven't had a bad experience at work. And I think it has to be on a case-by-case basis, to

be honest. And I think I agree with you that the best part of call initially is **not to go over their head** and then go to the next person in the chain of command. I definitely don't think that's the first step. Absolutely not. Because you just break the trust immediately then. And even though it's a difficult conversation that you have to have with this person, you have to have it with them first. And then take it from there. Perhaps, like you said, go to HR. And then, worst-case scenario, if there's absolutely nothing you feel that you can do, as a last resort you could take it to somebody else in the chain of command, as you said before.

But it's really hard. I know maybe you're listening to this and maybe you think, "Oh, I've got a really difficult boss." There's a term now we say, sort of "toxic boss." My friend, for example, has got a really, really toxic boss. And it really affected their life because it was all day, constant, just, berating. A very difficult person to work with. Now, the problem here was that this person was the owner of the company. So, in this case, there's nobody above them. So, you can't even **go over their head**. And I think this type of company, where the boss is the founder, is quite difficult to manage. It's a small company, and the founder is the person who is the boss. That's really hard. Because if they're really difficult and they're really toxic, there's basically nothing that you can do about it. 'Cause there's nobody else to go to.

Andrew: You gotta dust off the CV and look for a new job.

Anna: Exactly. And get looking for another job. Exactly, exactly. And that's actually what they did in the end. But it's really hard. And if you have a boss and they're difficult to work with, it can really affect your life. And I just remember from this experience with my friend because they would come home, and it would be on their mind all the time. And they would talk about it. And you know, the reason they would talk about it is because it was affecting them so much. But yeah, your boss can have a big impact on your life if you're working a lot. Like, I'm sure a lot of people listening to this podcast. You guys, I'm sure you work a lot. So, it's, it's difficult. But I think to come back to the main point: is it ever acceptable? I think it just depends on the situation and you have to judge it on a case-by-

case basis. But initially it's probably better to try to have the conversation with that person first, even though it's difficult and even though it's tough.

Andrew: Yeah, I completely agree, and I'm just thinking. I'm like you, Anna. I've had great relationships with almost all of my bosses my whole life, and what a privilege and lucky experience that has been because, yeah, it can be really, really tough. So yeah, everybody's situation, like I said at the start, it's really case-by-case. I can only talk to my experience and how I would act in the situations that I've been in. But if I had somebody that was an abusive toxic boss, then **desperate times call for desperate measures** and who knows. You got to do what you got to do to try and protect yourself in your office situation. So yeah, thankfully at least for me, I haven't had to deal with that, and fingers crossed I don't in the future as well.

Anna, I thought we could do just some quick rapid-fire questions here with our remaining topics that we didn't have enough time to cover in the regular version of this episode, just for our Culips members as a way to say thank you to all of them for their support. And guys, thanks for your support.

Anna, rapid-fire question one: how do you feel about employees who personalize their office space? So I'm thinking maybe in an open office where you have a bunch of cubicles, and some people maybe like to really personalize their cubicle. Maybe, of course, the classic is like a picture of your family, right? But maybe taking it even more extreme than that. Putting stickers on their computer or, I don't know, some plants in their cubicle, decorations. What are your feelings about that?

Anna: Why not? It makes no difference to me whatsoever. As long as it's not on my desk, I don't mind. I think it's quite nice actually. It makes it feel a little bit more homely. But nowadays in a lot of offices since the pandemic, they're doing hot desking so you can't even really make your desks personal anymore, but I think why not? If you want to, go for it. What do you think, Andrew?

Andrew: Anna, I just have to clarify. I think that's a new term for me, "hot desking." But I want to guess what it is, and you can tell me if this is correct or not. I think hot desking is where there's no assigned desk, and when you go to the office, maybe because 80% of the workforce is working from home that day and 20% of the employees are working from the office, then you can just choose any open seat, but it's only your seat for the day. Is that what it means?

Anna: Exactly that! So there's no assigned desks, which basically means that you get the luck of the draw when you arrive. So the earlier you arrive at the office, the better the desk you get, otherwise you're going to be having a desk next to the toilet or in a really inconvenient spot with no natural light. The common complaints of some of my clients that go into the office now and do hot desking is that it's an absolute disaster if you get there late to the office because you're going to be next to the toilet.

Andrew: Some motivation to arrive early. To answer the question, I also have no issue with this. If you have some office plants, just don't let them die, right? As long as they're alive and thriving then it's OK, but if you had some dead plants that could bring down the office mood. But otherwise, I think decorating your cubicle is OK.

Anna, what do you think about an office dog? You know, sometimes you go to like an accounting office. I'm thinking about my Canadian accountant's office, and they had a dog in the office. Would you like to work in an environment with a dog, or how do you feel as a customer going to an office where there's a dog there?

Anna: I mean, of course first of all we have to get out of the way that some people are allergic to dogs, so obviously that's not very helpful if you're an employee and there's a dog in the office.

I don't know, I think it's too much of a distraction. Dogs are cute and I think I would be distracted if there was a dog in the office because I want to be like 'OK, come here' and like stroke it and things like this, so I think it might be a bit of a distraction. But this is a funny thing that one of my clients told me is that actually nowadays, what a lot of offices,

new office builds, are requesting is like a pet nursery. So in the office there's an inbuilt nursery where you can bring your dog to work there, leave it there for the day while you're working, and then take it home. So apparently that is something that companies are requesting in new builds for offices. Apparently, I don't know, that's just what somebody told me. But yeah, that would be cool like if it was in a nursery, but I think just sort of running around my, by the desks, I'm not sure. But I don't know, it depends. As always, it's case by case, right, like we said before. It really just depends. Maybe everybody loves dogs in which case go for it. What do you think, Andrew? Do you think it's a bit of a distraction or?

Andrew: Could be a distraction, but I would love it, I think. Yeah.

Anna: Yeah, right.

Andrew: I would like it. I think it could boost employee morale, but you'd all have to be on the same page. And allergies are an issue for sure, but yeah, I think it could be good. And yeah, playing with the dog or taking it out for a walk could be a nice excuse to like get out and get some fresh air during the day.

Anna: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Andrew: How about talking about getting outside for some **quote unquote** "fresh air." How about smoke breaks? You know, smoking is going down around the world and probably in the next hundred years employees won't be talking about this issue, but you know there are some people who smoke cigarettes and they have to go outside and smoke several times a day, and often that turns into 10-15 minutes of break time. Whereas non-smoking employees don't get that same break time. And so this has been a point of contention. I think there's a famous *Friends* episode about this even, I seem to recall. And so, I don't know, how do you feel about employees who get, you know, an extra 30 to 45 minutes of break time during a day because they need to take a smoke break?

Anna: This is a controversial topic, I have to say. And from my personal experience, we did have an issue with this because I remember I worked in an office and there were a group of people who were smokers and they would go out three to four times a day, and when you add up that time - that's 15 minutes times four - that could add up to an hour. So it's tricky though because in a way it's kind of straight down the line, it's obvious, it's like, look, you're having an hour extra than other people and that's not fair. I don't know, I'm really not sure how other companies have managed this. I think sometimes they try to put limits on the number of smoke breaks or maybe the time that you have there as well. And I was never really part of the smoking club. Because I think there is like a community that develops around the people in the office who smoke or vape. I think we should add vape in there as well because now that's a big thing over here too that people vape. And I was never really part of the club, so I don't really know what their opinion is on it, but yeah, I don't know, it's controversial. I just don't know how companies can deal with that well because it is inherently unfair in a way, you know, because it's just a habit, right? So I could say for example, "Oh well, I have another habit." I like to, I don't know, go running for example, "So I'm gonna go running for 15 minutes at several points during the day." And they would say "Oh well, that's not fair, you can't do that." So, I don't know, it's a tough one. What's your take on it?

Andrew: I think in offices where you're salaried, maybe, it's not so bad because at least here in Korea. I'm thinking of Korea, and to be honest with you, smoking has gone down so substantially in Canada. Like, I come from, you know, a rock and roll background. When I was younger, I was in bands and stuff, so all of my friends smoked cigarettes when we were in our 20s and stuff, but now it's like nobody smokes. And even when I go back to Canada, on the street it's really rare to see somebody smoking a cigarette. And if you smell it you're like "Wow, it's weird!" And yeah, I don't know, it's really strange. But here in Korea, I'd also say that smoking is down a lot, like over the last decade or so. There's still a lot of vaping and smoking, don't get me wrong, but it's really down substantially. But I think in a Korean context, you have so many salaried employees who have to work a ton of overtime anyways. So, it's like, yeah, they're taking several breaks from working

throughout the day but they're also staying till like 9 p.m. at night. So it doesn't really matter, right? But if it were like a situation where you're getting paid by the hour and you have a set shift of eight hours and you're taking, I don't know, 30 to 45 minutes out of that time, then that would be a huge problem. And I think if I were the boss or the business owner I'd be like "There's no way you're doing that." Like maybe back in the day when smoking was more acceptable that would be OK. But these days I think there's no excuse for that. You know, we have gums and patches and vapes. Like you said, there are some other ways that you can get around the issue, maybe. It's a tough one.

Anna: Yeah, absolutely. If you make up the time during the day then whatever, it doesn't really matter. And like you said, normally maybe it evens itself out if you're maybe take a couple of smoke breaks but then you stay until 10 o'clock at night. Well, I think we can let you off for that. But yeah, I think again it just depends on the situation, the context. But you know, I have seen issues with that in the past and it does cause a little bit of tension with people in the office. It does create that sort of office sort of gossip thing like you were talking about earlier. Like "Oh, I don't know why she gets to go on a smoking break, and we're not allowed to go on a coffee break when we want." Blah blah blah. So, you know, all the wonderful things that happen in offices.

Andrew: Last question, Anna, here for you. These days a lot of people like to work with their AirPods in or their headphones on, listening to music or podcasts or just noise cancelling. Right, noise cancelling headphones now are everywhere. They've come down so much in price, they're actually quite affordable now. And so, people like to block out some of the office chit chat in the background or, you know, a lot of people work in noisy environments where it's really hard to focus. And Anna, maybe you would know better than me, but I'm positive that I've read some statistics online before about how when you're focused and you're working and then you get distracted, getting back into that flow state or that state of heavy concentration can be really, really, really difficult. And so, if you have something that breaks your concentration like maybe somebody's weird ringtone for their phone or, I don't know, somebody chatting in the background that you just can't zone out, then that could really break your focus and lead to lower overall productivity in the

office. So I'm curious: is using headphones acceptable to you, what do you think about that?

Anna: For me it's fine, I actually used to use headphones sometimes. From the other point of view, I remember that I used to work with a technology company and I would work with some of the senior managers there. And they would always sort of make little comments and they would say, you know, it's kind of annoying when people are wearing headphones because I then have to tap them on the shoulder to ask them a question. And they're kind of off in their own world and I don't know whether to go up to them or not. This is also another concern that people have. So, if somebody's wearing headphones, they maybe feel a little bit nervous about going up to them and asking a question even though they really need an answer to their question. So again, it's a little bit tricky because on the one hand, I totally understand that people need to concentrate, so in that sense I'm all for headphones. Sometimes you just need to block out the world, you've got something to write, you've got something to do, and you just need to get on with it. But I think if you do it all the time, so I remember there were a couple of employees I used to work with that would do it all the time. In that case, I don't think it's very helpful because you're essentially telling people "Go away, don't speak to me." And you know, we work in an office, it's collaborative, people need to speak to you. I think it's one of those things to put people off from coming up to you, which is fine when you're doing a specific piece of work, but I think doing it all the time maybe might be a little bit much. But that's just my personal viewpoint. Where do you sit on that, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah, as a music and podcast lover, obviously I want to be able to use my headphones. And it does help me focus and does help me block out loud noises and stuff, so I'm all for it from a productivity standpoint. I do get when you need to interface with other people that that's an issue, although these days we have apps like Slack and Microsoft Teams and all of the different ones where we can message each other. So if you did have to talk to a co-worker immediately, maybe instead of freaking them out by tapping them on the shoulder, you could just send them a message. And then say "Hey, do you

have five minutes, could I talk to you for a sec like over by the water cooler?" Right, you could do it that way. Maybe that's a solution.

But I do get what you're saying about people who are just antisocial by having them in all the time. Like I knew of a guy who would wear his AirPods right from the second he got to the office, like in the hallways, in the elevators, at lunch, and is just trying to block out everybody all of the time. And that's a little bit weird. Like I get it when you're focusing on your work, that's OK, but in other situations, you know, it's a social situation, we're social animals, I get that some people are introverted. I'm introverted, I don't really like small chat too, but it's just like one of those things that we have to suck up and do sometimes. So, it's tough but done in the right way I think it's OK. Well, Anna, let's wrap it up here. Thanks for listening everybody and we'll catch you in the next episode, goodbye!

Anna: See you soon guys, bye!

Andrew: That brings us to the end of this lesson, talk to you next time, bye!

Detailed Explanations

Quote unquote Expression

In the episode, Andrew uses the phrase "**quote unquote**" to emphasize that he is questioning the words he says next. For example, he asks Anna her opinion on wearing shorts and sandals to the office in hot weather describing this as "the type of clothes that you wouldn't necessarily think are **quote unquote** professional clothes." Here, he is emphasizing that some people might not consider these clothes truly professional.

The expression "**quote unquote**" is used to draw attention to the specific word or phrase that follows it. It can show sarcasm, irony, or that the speaker is questioning the typical meaning of the term. For instance, let's say your boss promised to provide a generous bonus at the end of the year, but she only ended up giving you \$50. You might sarcastically say, "Wow, I'm so thankful for this **quote unquote** bonus." By using **quote unquote**, it shows you don't really think this amount of money can be called a bonus at all.

Another example could be that you suspect two of your friends are secretly dating. You might tell another friend, "Yeah, Jennifer and Chris are still saying that they're **quote unquote** just friends." Adding **quote unquote** shows you doubt that they're actually just friends – you are sure that they have a romantic connection.

Saying "**quote unquote**" functions like using air quotes with your fingers but in spoken form. Air quotes come from the English punctuation called quotes – “ ”. These are used when sharing a quote from a speaker, introducing an unfamiliar term, or to add a sense of skepticism or doubtfulness about the phrase inside the quotes.

Here are a few more examples with **quote unquote**:

Ben: How's the remodeling going?

Hannah: The contractor says it's on schedule and that my living room is **quote unquote** almost finished. Really, it's still a construction zone. I doubt it'll be done before Christmas.

Lois: The restaurant we went to on Monday is being advertised as "authentic Italian cuisine."

Robby: Yeah, authentic. Like that **quote unquote** 'Italian pizza' they served with pineapple on top.

To draw the line

Idiomatic verb

To draw the line is a verb means to set a clear limit or boundary on what you find acceptable. In the episode, Anna uses the phrase to explain her limits regarding certain behaviors or preferences. For example, she says, "It's very hard **to draw the line**," when talking about defining casual clothing in the workplace. She means it's difficult to decide what is acceptable and what isn't because everyone has a different idea of what "casual" looks like. Later, she says, "[Fish and eggs] are my two things where **I draw the line**," when talking about eating smelly foods in the office. Here, she's making it clear that she would never bring those foods for lunch at work because the smell is too strong.

The verb **to draw the line** can be used whenever someone wants to establish what is or isn't acceptable in a situation. For example, "I **draw the line** at working on weekends," means that working weekends is a personal boundary you won't cross. Another example could be, "You can borrow my clothes, but I **draw the line** at my favorite jacket." This means you're willing to share most of your clothing, but not your favorite article.

The origin of the phrase likely comes from the idea of drawing a literal line on the ground to separate two areas or mark a limit. Over time, it began to represent figurative boundaries in behavior or actions. To remember it, think of a mental line you "draw" to separate what you will and won't accept.

Similar expressions include "set a boundary," "put your foot down," and "take a stand." For example, "I need to set a boundary with my coworker about calling me after hours."

Here are a few more examples with **to draw the line**:

Elliot: My cousin keeps asking to borrow money, and I don't want to ruin our relationship, but it's getting out of hand.

Bonnie: That's tough, but you need **to draw the line** somewhere. Maybe tell him this is the last time you can help.

Elliot: Yeah, I think I need to set that boundary.

Wendy: I think I'm struggling with phone addiction. I can't stop scrolling!

Liam: It's definitely tough. Maybe try to make some phone-free spaces in your day? I try **to draw the line** at meals. It helps me focus on enjoying my food.

Behind the times

Expression

In the episode, Anna uses the expression "**behind the times**" to describe a company rule that doesn't allow employees to wear jeans to work. She says, "I think that's a little bit **behind the times** because I think jeans can actually look quite smart." Here, she means that the rule feels outdated, as fashion has changed, and jeans can now be considered appropriate in certain professional settings when styled properly.

The phrase "**behind the times**" means being old-fashioned, outdated, or not keeping up with modern trends or ideas. For example, if a company still uses paper records instead of digital ones, someone might say, "Their system is so **behind the times**—they should modernize it already." "**Behind the times**" can also apply to personal habits, like someone refusing to use a smartphone and sticking with an old flip phone.

This expression is commonly used to describe people, rules, businesses, or ideas that seem stuck in the past. It originates from the concept of time as something we move forward with—if you're "**behind the times**," you're lagging while the world progresses. It's a useful phrase for talking about situations where change is needed.

Some similar expressions include "outdated," "old-fashioned," "out of touch," and "stuck in the past."

Be careful not to confuse this phrase with "to be behind on time," which means being slow or late. **Behind the times** specifically refers to being outdated.

- Incorrect: "I was **behind the times** this morning because I missed my train." ✗
- Correct: "The train station is **behind the times**—they don't even sell electronic tickets." ✓

Here are a few more examples with **behind the times**:

Derek: Did you see the menu at that restaurant? They don't have any vegetarian options.

Jocelyn: Yeah, they're really **behind the times**. Almost every place offers vegetarian or vegan dishes now.

Annie: I went to that boutique downtown, and they only take cash.

Kevin: Really? That's so **behind the times**. Who doesn't take cards these days?

Double standard

Noun

Andrew uses the term "**double standard**" when discussing workplace clothing rules. He points out how men are usually expected to wear pants and closed shoes, even in hot weather, while women can wear skirts and open-toed sandals, which are cooler and more comfortable. He asks Anna, "Do you think there is a bit of a **double standard**? Where guys have to wear more uncomfortable clothing just because of society's expectations?" Here, Andrew uses the word "**double standard**" to refer to different rules or expectations for men and women, which many people might view as unfair.

A **double standard** happens when one group is treated differently or held to stricter rules than another, even though the situations are similar. For example, if a company allows senior employees to work remotely but insists that junior employees come to the office every day, it creates a **double standard** that might frustrate younger staff. Similarly, in personal relationships, someone might call it a **double standard** if Mary expects loyalty from her boyfriend, Steven, even when Mary openly flirts with others.

The term **double standard** highlights the inconsistency of applying one set of rules to one group and a different set to another. The phrase originates from the concept of having two different "standards" or rules for the same behavior. It emphasizes unfairness or inequality, especially in situations where people or groups should be treated equally.

Similar expressions include "bias" or "unfair treatment," but "**double standard**" specifically refers to the existence of two conflicting sets of rules. For example, someone might say, "When a man works overtime, he's called dedicated, but when a woman does, she's told she's neglecting her family. What a **double standard**!"

Here are a couple more examples with **double standard**:

James: My school enforces a strict dress code for girls, but the boys can wear almost anything they want.

Sophia: That's a clear **double standard**. If there's a dress code, it should apply equally to everyone.

Mia: My partner gets upset when I go out with my friends, but he spends every weekend with his.

Howard: How can you tolerate such a **double standard**? You deserve the same freedom he has. I would call him out on that.

To go over someone's head

Idiomatic verb

In the episode, Anna introduces the expression "**to go over someone's head**" when discussing workplace conflicts. She asks Andrew if he thinks it's ever acceptable to bypass your boss and take an issue to someone higher up in the company hierarchy. She says, "How do you feel about **going over your boss's head**?" In this situation, Anna is referring to the decision to skip your boss and speak directly to their superior, especially when you feel your concerns aren't being heard or addressed properly.

The expression "**to go over someone's head**" means to bypass someone in authority and take a problem, question, or request to a higher authority. It often happens in workplaces where there's a chain of command. For instance, if an employee feels their manager isn't addressing their concerns, they might **go over their manager's head** and talk to the department head instead. While this can sometimes resolve problems, it can also damage relationships, as it might be seen as undermining the authority of the person you skipped.

The phrase likely originates from the idea of metaphorically "reaching above" someone's authority to someone with more power. To remember it, think of a hierarchy as a ladder. If you skip the person directly above you, you're climbing over or "**going over**" their head to someone higher up.

Be careful not to mix this up with the identical phrasal verb "**to go over one's head**," which means to not understand a concept or joke. For example, "That joke totally went over my head. I didn't get it when he said it." You can tell the difference from context - a *person goes over someone's head* when they take a problem to a higher level in the chain of command. However, a joke or complicated concept (*not* a person) **goes over someone's head** when that person fails to understand.

Here are a couple more examples with **to go over someone's head**:

Monica: I've been asking my manager for weeks to approve my vacation request, but she keeps ignoring my emails.

Paul: That's frustrating. Are you thinking of **going over her head**?

Monica: I might have to. I'll talk to the HR director if she doesn't respond by Friday.

Kyle: I've been dealing with a really toxic coworker, and my supervisor isn't doing anything about it.

Josie: That's not okay. You might need to **go over his head** and report it to HR.

Desperate times call for desperate measures

Expression

Andrew uses the expression "**desperate times call for desperate measures**" when discussing what someone might do if they have an abusive or toxic boss. He explains that in extreme situations, people may need to take extreme actions to protect themselves at work. For example, if someone's workplace is unbearable, they might feel forced **to go over their boss's head** or even quit their job without a backup plan. This phrase highlights how difficult circumstances can lead to actions that might seem drastic or unusual under normal conditions.

Desperate times call for desperate measures is a saying that means that when a situation is very serious or urgent, people may need to take bold, unconventional, or extreme actions to handle it. For example, if a company is on the brink of collapse, the owner might sell their house to save the business. While this might seem shocking, it reflects the seriousness of the situation – **desperate times call for desperate measures**.

Another example could be deciding to sell your prized record collection because you lost your job and can't afford this month's rent. If your friend asks why you're selling your beloved records, you might reply by saying, "**Desperate times call for desperate measures**."

Be careful not to over-use this expression or use it casually for minor problems. For example:

- Incorrect: "I forgot my lunch today, so I bought a sandwich instead. **Desperate times call for desperate measures**." (This isn't really a desperate situation.)
- Correct: "The power went out during the snowstorm, so we burned furniture to stay warm. **Desperate times call for desperate measures**."

Here are a few more examples with **desperate times call for desperate measures**:

Emma: Why are you using duct tape to hold your car's bumper in place?

Jake: I can't afford to fix it right now, and it was falling off. **Desperate times call for desperate measures**.

Ivan: Why are you studying in the bathroom...?

Diane: It's the only quiet place in the house right now. I need to pass this exam or I'll fail the class. **Desperate times call for desperate measures**.

Expressions Quiz

1. A “double standard” refers to:

- a) A situation where two rules apply equally.
- b) An inconsistency where one group is treated differently than another.
- c) A set of strict but fair guidelines.
- d) A company that enforces only one rule for all employees.

2. Which scenario shows someone “drawing the line”?

- a) Refusing to work overtime every weekend.
- b) Volunteering to take on extra shifts.
- c) Agreeing to help coworkers with their personal tasks.
- d) Avoiding conflict when something feels unfair.

3. A person might be accused of being “behind the times” if they:

- a) Refuse to adapt to modern technology or ideas.
- b) Learn quickly and adopt new habits.
- c) Always suggest innovative solutions.
- d) Avoid nostalgic traditions.

4. Which of the following situations would NOT fit the phrase "desperate times call for desperate measures"?

- a) Borrowing money to cover unexpected medical expenses.
- b) Moving into a smaller home to save money after losing your job.
- c) Eating at a new restaurant because your favorite one is closed.
- d) Using duct tape to fix a broken window during a severe storm.

5. True or False: If someone says, "He's quote unquote ‘the hardest worker,’" they are likely being genuine and complimentary.

- a) True
- b) False

Listening Comprehension Quiz

6. According to Anna, what clothing item is prohibited at her Spanish workplace?
7. How does Andrew define “business casual” for men in North America?
8. What did Andrew do during a summer heatwave to stay comfortable and presentable at work?
9. What does Andrew believe the purpose of having a “scent-free zone” at a workplace is?
10. What does Anna suggest the downside of “hot desking” is?

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. What kind of dress code is expected at your workplace? (If you don't currently work, you can describe a previous workplace or the dress code at your high school or university). Do you think it is a fair and appropriate dress code? Would business casual or smart-casual be permitted?
2. Do you think there are **double standards** for how men and women are expected to dress and behave in professional settings in your country? Discuss what you think about these expectations and whether they are changing.
3. Do you agree that strong-smelling food should be banned from offices or shared spaces? Why or why not? Where do you **draw the line**? What would you do if the smell of someone's lunch bothered you?
4. Do you think wearing headphones at work is helpful or rude? How would you balance personal focus with team collaboration?
5. Describe what a perfect office environment would look like for you. Would it include a gym, pet-friendly policies, or other features?

Quiz Answers

- 1.b 2.a 3.a 4.c 5.b
6. Trainers (known as sneakers in American English) and jeans.
7. A nice shirt with a collar and a pair of chinos or well-fitted jeans.
8. He changed out of his sweaty clothes into fresh clothes once he arrived at work.
9. To prevent allergic reactions and headaches
10. Arriving late could leave you with an undesirable desk, like one near the toilet.

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