Perceptions of Civility for Mobile Phone Use in Formal and Informal Meetings

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Abstract

We report our survey research about what American business professionals consider appropriate or civil mobile phone behavior during formal and informal meetings. The findings come from two of our recent research studies: an open-ended survey of 204 employees at a beverage distributor on the East Coast and a nationwide, random-sample survey of 350 business professionals in the United States. There were significant differences by age, group, gender, region, and income level. The differences between women and men were quite striking, with men nearly twice as likely to consider various mobile phone behaviors as acceptable in informal meetings.

Keywords

business etiquette, computer-mediated communication, interpersonal communication, new media

Many scholars and social commentators observe that American society is increasingly uncivil, even compared to 5 to 10 years ago. The workplace is no exception, with research showing that half of all employees report being treated uncivilly at work at least once per week. Sixty percent of employees report experiencing stress at work due to incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2005, 2009). Some observers identify mobile phone use in public and professional settings as either causes of or symptoms of this growing incivility (Forni, 2008; Höflich, 2006; Pearson & Porath, 2005, 2009).

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Perhaps one reaction to the perceived loss of civility in society and in the workplace is a growing demand for business professionals who demonstrate civility. One recent study showed that courtesy (manners, business etiquette, graciousness, respectfulness) is among the most important soft skills sought after by hiring managers, even more important than soft skills such as responsibility, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, work ethic, and teamwork skills (Robles, 2012).

Some descriptive survey research has shown that rude behavior on cell phones is common. For example, a recent Pew Internet and American Life Project report showed that nearly 39% of the American population frequently encounters rude cell phone behavior in public (Smith, 2012). Yet little research is available about what business professionals perceive as civil or acceptable use of mobile phones in the workplace. As a result, we wanted to examine perceptions of civility for mobile phone use at work. In this article, we first provide some theoretical background to our research. Then, we provide findings and conclusions to two research studies we conducted about perceptions of civility in informal and formal meetings.

Theoretical Background

Roughly 85% of American adults own a mobile phone. Among Gen Y (18 to 29 years old) and Gen X (30 to 49 years old) adults, mobile phone ownership is 94% and 90%, respectively (Duggan & Rainie, 2012). Yet although mobile phones are nearly ubiquitous in American society, little scholarly research is available about the social norms associated with mobile phone use in the workplace.

From a social science perspective, perhaps the most common vein of research about mobile phones is the relationship between mobile phones and social identity. Much of this research has focused on younger people who have grown up with mobile phones as a part of the socialization process. This line of research has generally shown that mobile phones have strongly influenced the formation of social identities in young people's lives and have thus become key factors in establishing social norms and rules (Campbell, 2006; Srivastava, 2005; Stald, 2008).

From a business perspective, some research has examined the impact of mobile phones on performance. For the most part, this research indicates that using mobile devices leads to multitasking with minimal or negative impacts on individual and team productivity (Lyons, Kim, & Nevo, 2010; Middleton & Cukier, 2006). However, research about mobile phone use among sales professionals has shown dramatic improvements in performance (Aberdeen Group, 2007; Norris, 2007). For example, Norris (2007) explained how marketers, especially sales representatives, could exchange information with an increasing number of clients, customers, consumers, and stakeholders. As a result, they increase their levels of productivity, performance, and outreach by staying in touch with their clientele base, which in turn increases responsiveness and profit margins.

Research about perceptions of rudeness of mobile phone use in meetings, however, is limited to just two known scholarly studies. Pinchot, Paullet, and Rota (2011) surveyed undergraduate and graduate students about social norms related to mobile phone

use. They found that 42% of the students said they had taken a call in a meeting. Most shocking to the researchers was the fact that 11% of the students had taken a call during a funeral. Approximately 63% of the students considered accepting a call during a face-to-face meeting as "rude."

Bajko (2011) recently surveyed 105 Canadian professionals about mobile phone use in meetings. Approximately 62% of these professionals said that using a Blackberry was inappropriate during meetings, and roughly 68% said using an iPhone was inappropriate in meetings. Interestingly, just 24% thought using a laptop in a meeting was not appropriate. Roughly 71% of the professionals said they would not make a call or take a call during a meeting. Approximately 63% said that they would not text message during meetings. The authors concluded that although mobile phone use in meetings is becoming more acceptable, it is still generally considered rude, inappropriate, or distracting during most meetings.

Typically, we have found little research to suggest how factors such as gender and income level affect social norms related to mobile phone use. In the two scholarly studies about perceptions of rudeness of mobile phone use in meetings cited above (Bajko, 2011; Pinchot et al., 2011), no information is provided about gender and income level. However, a recent Pew study seems to indicate that women and higher-income individuals are more likely to observe or consider mobile phone behaviors as rude (Smith, 2012). We are not aware of scholarly research that directly addresses civility norms for mobile phone use among American professionals. However, some research indicates that Americans are less accepting of mobile phone use in work environments and are more likely to see it as distracting compared with other cultures (Peng & Chu, 2012).

We found that the literature falls short in several ways in identifying how mobile phone behaviors at meetings are perceived as appropriate or not. First, the few studies about mobile phone use in meetings focus only on a few behaviors—taking or making calls. We think that additional mobile phone behaviors should be examined. Second, the few studies about mobile phone use in meetings do not classify the type of meeting involved. Kleinman (2007) has hypothesized that the type of meeting influences norms of mobile phone use based on prior literature about meetings. Finally, the few studies about mobile phone use do not provide any information about how gender, income, or region may affect perceptions of civility for mobile phone use in meetings.

Study 1: Exploratory Company Study

In our initial exploratory study, we sought to gain an understanding of what mobile phone behaviors are considered rude by professionals. We surveyed 204 employees at a beverage distributor on the East Coast. The sample included a slight majority of men (58.8%) and included all age groups (18-30 years, 31.4%; 31-40 years, 20.6%; 41-50 years, 19.1%; 51-65 years, 24.5%; above 65 years, 3.4%). Our sample spanned several divisions within the company and included many positions (manager, 16.2%; merchandiser, 9.3%; office worker, 18.6%; sales rep, 25.5%; driver, 9.8%; warehouse, 13.2%; other, 7.4%).

We asked these employees to answer the open-ended question, "Have you observed disrespectful cell phone use in the workplace recently?" Respondents provided many examples of rude cell phone behaviors in many situations. In Table 1, we present eight types of rude mobile phone behavior that we coded for meetings. Sample comments for each type of behavior are also included. Altogether, 101 of the 204 employees (49.5%) commented on mobile phone behaviors in meetings. Overwhelmingly, taking or making calls during meetings were the most commonly cited examples, with more than one half of employees who commented about meetings stating they had recently observed this behavior and considered it disrespectful. Writing and reading text messages or emails followed, with roughly one third of the employees citing these actions as recent examples of disrespectful phone use. Roughly one fourth of employees had observed recent examples of employees checking incoming calls or allowing their phones to ring that they thought were rude. Several other actions were cited less frequently, including browsing the Internet, excusing oneself from a meeting to take a call, bringing a phone to a meeting, and checking the time with a phone.

In an open-ended format, we got some sense of the intensity of some of these comments. Many professionals used phrases such as "people are so inconsiderate," "disrespectful mobile phone usage is everywhere," and "it is very disruptive." The intensity of these comments was stronger when talking about what managers do.

Study 2: Nationwide Survey of Working Professionals

We wanted to gain an understanding of perceptions of appropriate mobile phone use among working professionals. So we administered our survey to a random sample of 350 American full-time working professionals. We limited responses to professionals making at least $30,000 per year in companies with 50 or more employees (see Table 2 for detailed demographic information).

We asked survey respondents to state the appropriateness of eight mobile phone actions in meetings (as identified in our open-ended survey): making or answering calls, writing and sending texts or emails, checking text messages or emails, browsing the Internet, checking time with phone, checking incoming calls, bringing a phone to meetings, and excusing oneself to answer calls. We adopted a 4-item scale often used to assess social norms or civility for each action: 1 = *usually appropriate*, 2 = *sometimes appropriate*, 3 = *rarely appropriate*, and 4 = *never appropriate* (Young, 2008). Respondents were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of these actions in two situations: formal meetings at the workplace and informal, offsite lunch meetings.

We first note the descriptive statistics of our survey. Table 3 shows the perceived appropriateness of these various mobile phone behaviors during formal meetings at the workplace. The actions are rank-ordered, starting with the least accepted mobile phone behaviors to those behaviors that are more widely accepted. More than three quarters of respondents considered making or answering a call (87.1%), writing and sending texts or emails (84.0%), checking texts or emails (76.0%), and browsing the

Table 1. Types of Disrespectful Mobile Phone Behaviors in Meetings.

Action	Count	Examples
Taking or making calls	57	I recently had a meeting where the manager answered his phone and talked for 10 minutes while I sat and waited. I thought the long conversation was rude.
		I have seen individuals answer phones loudly during meetings without excusing themselves. Unfortunately, this has become the norm in some workplaces and has become an acceptable practice.
Writing text messages or emails	36	Sending text messages to other members in the meeting to discuss what the others are saying [was rude].
		Last week a woman spent the entire time texting on her phone. I found it to be very disrespectful. I consistently looked in her direction, but it did not stop her from continuing her conversation through texting.
Reading text messages or emails	35	During our weekly staff meeting one of the other employees was constantly on their Blackberry checking email. They were missing important information which could affect the overall performance of the company.
		I always see our managers checking their phones for texts and emails during formal meetings.
Checking incoming calls or allowing phone to ring	24	Higher management taking a call in the middle of a meeting is common. Even checking an incoming call makes you feel less important and distracts from the information being presented.
		While in a one-on-one meeting with a coworker, he [the manager] kept checking his phone every time it vibrated. He kept saying sorry, but it's very rude and inconsiderate to the person you are meeting with.
Browsing Internet	8	My coworkers are often on the Internet during meetings.
		Texting or surfing the web when doing business with a client [is disrespectful].
Excusing oneself to take a call	7	During a presentation, one of the presenters excused himself to take a phone call. After that interruption, everyone basically lost track of what the presentation was all about.
		During an interview, a prospective employee asked to be excused to answer his cell phone.
Bringing phone	5	Just bringing phones to the meeting shows disrespect.
Checking time	3	In the last few weeks, an example of disrespectful mobile behavior that I have observed was talking, texting, and looking at the time while talking.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents.

	Count	Percentage
Gender		
Men	186	53.1
Women	164	46.9
Age group		
21-30	35	10.0
31-40	95	27.1
41-50	87	24.9
51-65	133	38.0
Income		
$30,000 to $50,000	87	24.8
$50,000 to $80,000	124	35.4
$80,000 to $100,000	62	17.7
More than $100,000	77	22.0
Region		
Midwest	82	23.4
Northeast	93	26.6
Southeast	83	23.7
Southwest	45	12.9
West	47	13.4
Ethnicity		
African Americans	22	6.3
Asian Americans	17	4.9
Hispanic Americans	18	5.1
European American	259	74.0
Native American	4	1.1
Other	30	8.6
Total	350	100

Note. Because of rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

Table 3. Perceived Appropriateness of Mobile Phone Actions During Formal Meetings at the Workplace.

	M	SD	# Who Say Rarely/Never	% Who Say Rarely/Never
Making or answering calls	3.39	0.82	305	87.1
Writing and sending texts or emails	3.38	0.87	294	84.0
Checking text messages or emails	3.15	0.95	266	76.0
Browsing the Internet	3.17	0.95	265	75.7
Checking time with phone	2.75	1.03	202	57.7
Checking incoming calls	2.73	0.98	196	56.0
Bringing a phone to meeting	2.63	0.97	195	55.7
Excusing oneself to answer calls	2.69	0.88	191	54.6

Table 4. Perceived Appropriateness of Mobile Phone Actions During Informal, Offsite Lunch Meetings.

	M	SD	# Who Say Rarely/Never	% Who Say Rarely/Never
Writing and sending texts or emails	2.89	0.97	232	66.3
Making or answering calls	2.69	0.92	215	61.4
Browsing the Internet	2.83	1.02	215	61.4
Checking text messages or emails	2.59	0.97	186	53.1
Excusing oneself to answer call	2.23	0.90	119	34.0
Checking incoming calls	2.23	0.91	118	33.7
Checking time with phone	2.19	0.96	115	32.9
Bringing phone to meeting	1.92	0.88	77	22.0

Internet (75.7%) as rarely or never acceptable in formal meetings. More than half of the respondents stated the remaining four actions were rarely or never acceptable.

Table 4 shows the perceived appropriateness of these various mobile phone behaviors during informal, offsite lunch meetings. The actions are rank-ordered, starting with the least accepted mobile phone behaviors to those behaviors that are more widely accepted. Roughly two thirds of respondents thought the following actions were rarely or never appropriate: writing and sending text messages or emails (66.3%), answering a call (61.4%), and browsing the Internet (61.4%). Approximately half of respondents thought checking text messages or emails (53.1%) is rarely or never appropriate. For the remaining behaviors, roughly one fourth to one third of respondents considered them rarely or never appropriate.

We developed a regression model for the formal and informal meeting scenarios to identify which demographic variables predicted perceived appropriateness of various mobile phone actions (see Table 5). As the dependent variable, we included a sum of all mobile phone behaviors. In the formal meeting setting (see Model 1 in Table 5), the following variables were significant predictors: age, income, and region. Not surprisingly, younger professionals were more likely to consider various mobile phone behaviors as appropriate during meetings. Also, higher-income professionals showed lower acceptance for mobile phone use during meetings. Finally, professionals in the Western region of the United States were less accepting of mobile phone use during meetings.

In the informal meeting setting (see Model 2 in Table 5), the following variables were significant predictors: age, gender, and region. Just as with formal meetings, younger professionals were more likely to accept mobile phone use during informal meetings. Women showed far less acceptance for the use of mobile phones during informal meetings. Also, professionals from the Southwest were less likely to be accepting of mobile phone use during informal meetings.

Table 5. Regression of Perceived Appropriateness of Mobile Phone Behaviors by Age, Gender, Income, and Region.

	Model 1: Formal Meetings		Model 2: Informal Meetings	
	B	SE B	B	SE B
Age	1.72**	.24	2.30**	.29
Gender (Men)				
Women	−.84	.5	−2.46**	.60
Income	−.35**	.1	−.216	.12
Region (Northeast)				
Midwest	.48	.70	−.66	.85
West	−2.28**	.83	−1.36	1.00
Southwest	−.90	.84	−2.26*	1.01
Southeast	−.32	.70	−1.23	.84

Note. R^2 = .19 for Model 1; R^2 = .20 for Model 2. Variables in parentheses are baseline measures for dummy coded variables. *Positive coefficients* imply more acceptance of mobile phone use in meeting. *Negative coefficients* imply less acceptance of mobile phone use in meetings.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the findings, we have made several basic conclusions. Most important, most professionals consider most mobile phone use during meetings as inappropriate or uncivil. Not surprisingly, younger professionals are more accepting of mobile phone use. Interestingly, women are far less accepting of mobile phone use during informal meetings. We also believe region and status affect norms of civility for mobile phone use. In this section, we elaborate on each of these conclusions.

Even With the Near Ubiquitous Presence of Mobile Devices, Professionals Rarely Consider Using Them During Meetings as Appropriate

In particular, making or taking calls, writing and sending texts or emails, checking text messages or emails, and browsing the Internet are considered strongly inappropriate in formal business meetings. Although these actions are slightly more accepted in informal meetings, majorities of Americans still consider them unacceptable.

Younger Professionals Are Far More Accepting of Mobile Phone Actions During Meetings

This is the least surprising conclusion from our survey. Our survey does show the magnitude of this difference in concrete terms. During formal meetings (see Figure 1),
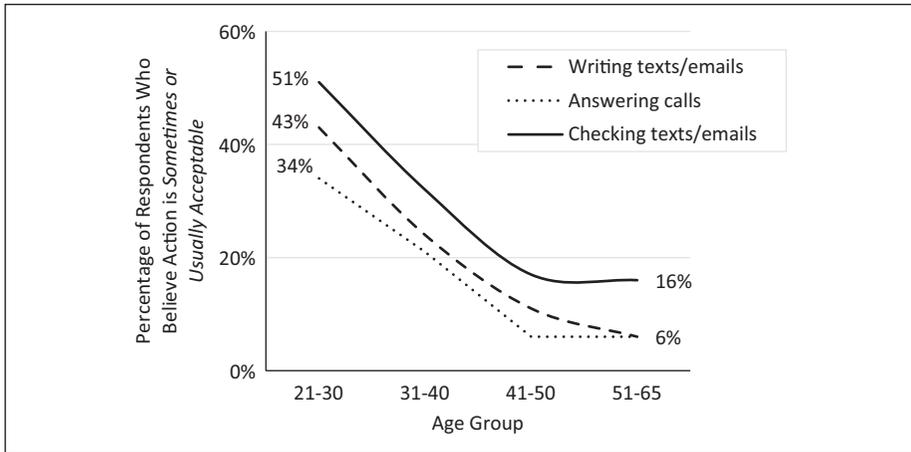
Figure 1. Perceived appropriateness of using mobile phones during formal business meetings.

a majority of younger professionals (21 to 30 years old) consider checking text messages and emails as appropriate. In fact, they are more than three times as likely to consider this as appropriate than professionals above 40 years of age.

The divide is perhaps most dramatic in informal meetings (see Figure 2). Strong majorities of younger employees (21 to 30 years old) considered checking text messages and emails, answering calls, and even writing text messages and emails as appropriate. On the other hand, strong majorities of employees above 41 years of age consider these actions as inappropriate. This seems to indicate major generational differences.

Women Are Far Less Accepting of Mobile Phone Use During Informal Meetings

One of the more interesting findings was the major gender gap in perceived appropriateness of mobile phone actions. In Figure 3, we highlight the difference between men and women for three mobile phone actions during informal meetings. As far as checking text messages, sending text messages, and answering calls, men are nearly twice as accepting of these behaviors. These survey results seem to indicate that women professionals hold different norms of civility as far as mobile phone use during informal meetings.

Perceptions of Appropriateness Vary by Region

Prior to getting the results, we suspected there might be some variation by region. We are unsure of any literature to indicate causes of regional differences. In formal meetings, professionals in the West were least accepting of mobile phone use during meetings. In informal meetings, professionals in the Southwest were least accepting of
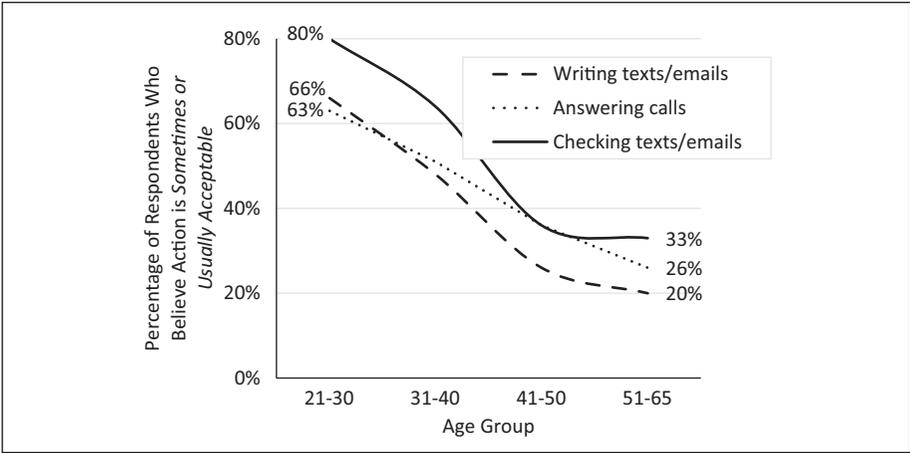
Figure 2. Perceived appropriateness of using mobile phones during informal business meetings.
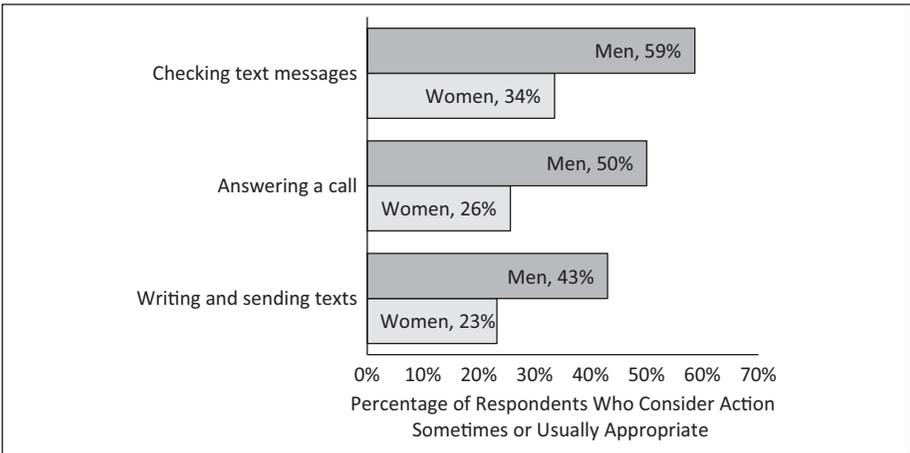
Figure 3. Perceived appropriateness of mobile phone behaviors at informal lunch meetings by gender.

mobile phone use. A possible explanation for more sensitivity to mobile phone use in the Southwest may be the emphasis on hospitality and manners. We are less sure about a possible explanation for lower acceptance for mobile phone behaviors among professionals in the West.

Status May Be an Important Part of Perceived Appropriateness

We are intrigued by the result that professionals with higher incomes are less accepting of mobile phone use in meetings. We suspect that one explanation is that higher-income

professionals are often in higher-status positions. As such, they may be more sensitive to subordinates who distract attention away from them during meetings.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

We think this research provides a baseline and foundation for future research. We note several limitations. First, we examined preferences and attitudes, not behaviors. Second, we did not capture how the status of meeting participants affects norms of civility for mobile phone use. Third, we examined in-person meetings, not other forms of technology-mediated meetings.

Since mobile phone use for professional purposes is likely to increase, we think that examining the related social norms is a particularly useful line of inquiry for business communication. We recommend additional research that addresses the following issues: (a) the impact of mobile phone preferences and attitudes on actual behavior, (b) the impact of status differentials on mobile phone norms and behaviors, (c) distinctions between social norms and behaviors for in-person and virtual meetings, and (d) social norms and behaviors for emerging forms of mobile devices such as tablets.

Implications for Business Communication Training

The recent work of Robles (2012) highlights the critical and growing demand for business professionals who are deemed outstanding in terms of soft skills such as civility. Among the best ways to demonstrate civility in professional settings is to use phones and other communication tools respectfully. This study provides strong support for the need to use mobile phones civilly. It also equips instructors and trainers with a current set of statistics about norms of civility associated with various mobile phone behaviors in formal and informal meetings. Business communication instructors and trainers can use the tables and figures in this article to help business students and professionals gain awareness of some of the dramatic generational and gender differences. Showing these figures and tables can also foster productive conversations about how generation, gender, and status affect perceptions of appropriate mobile phone use in formal and informal settings.

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