



WORK & FAMILY | NOVEMBER 9, 2011

Workplace Deals, Sealed With a Kiss?

By SUE SHELLENBARGER. LIKE THIS COLUMNIST. 182. MORE IN CAREERS MAIN »

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A line has formed to bid farewell to a longtime colleague who has taken a new job. At last, it's your turn to say goodbye. You:

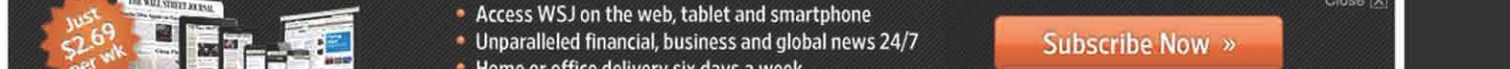
- a) Shake hands
- b) Hug
- c) Bro-hug
- d) Fist bump
- e) Chest bump

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The "right" response depends on the shifting workplace culture, shaped by increasing international diversity, age differences and workers' casual communications styles. As a result of the confusion, many people hesitate, or can be paralyzed with uncertainty over what's appropriate.



A colleague's going-away party and you stick out your hand to wish him well, but he leans in for a hug and you bump somewhere in between. Another colleague air kisses him on the cheek. Sue Shellenbarger on Lunch Break looks at awkward work manners.

professor of hers, and "he literally did a step back" and tensed, she says. "I backed up and said, 'Omigosh, I'm so sorry.'" She stuck thereafter to greeting him with a friendly, two-handed handshake, denoting warmth, she says.

"There's never been a more confusing time in the workplace" to figure out the rules of contact, says executive recruiter Jeff Kaye.

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making contact to avoid offending anyone.

The traditional handshake is still the rule in finance, banking and law—unless you're celebrating somebody's promotion or new job, when a hug or back pat is OK. Kisses and hugs are welcomed by entertainers and restaurateurs, and many twentysomething guys favor bro-hugs.

Discuss on the Juggle: Have you ever faced questions about how to greet someone at work or during a business trip? What are your personal rules about greeting clients or business contacts?

The four generations currently in the work world often differ on what is suitable physical contact. Gen-Y workers often see greetings as a chance to establish a distinct identity, says Bruce Tulgan, an author and consultant on generational

issues in New Haven, Conn. "They aspire to be a little different," he says, with a "customized self-presentation and style. Uniqueness is very important to them," he says.

Silicon Valley has so many international workers that almost any greeting goes—"cheek-kissing, bowing, the chin nod, and the eyebrow raise with a big smile," says Carolyn Hughes, a vice president at SimplyHired.com, a Mountain View, Calif., job-search site. Extend the traditional American handshake to a woman from parts of Eastern Europe or Asia, though, and you might offend.

Ms. Hughes, 43, tailors her greetings to how she actually feels about someone. "I'm a hugger," she says. "If I'm seeing you for the second time and I like you, the odds are high that you're going to get a big hug from me." She even hugged a job applicant recently when he arrived for his second interview with her. The embrace caught the recruit by surprise, she says, but it also sparked a more candid conversation. "He proceeded to be incredibly open with me. It was like we were old friends."

The worst gaffes happen when people try to be someone they're not. Los Angeles event planner Amy Malin, 34, was preparing to give a marketing presentation to a dozen managers several years ago when an executive in his 50s walked in and greeted her with a chest-bump. "He was trying to show me, 'I'm young and I'm hip and I'm cool,'" says Ms. Malin, president of Trueheart Events. "But he was old enough to be my father. It was really awkward."

Noting her astonishment, the executive tried to explain that he wanted to do "what all the cool kids are doing," says Ms. Malin. "I was laughing pretty hard and so was everyone else in the room, and I said, 'Not in my circle.'" She adds that the executive was a little embarrassed, but was able to laugh.

Complicating the rules of engagement are office celebrations and parties. In his job as an analyst for a New York City financial-services company, Ismail Humet has been taught in sexual-harassment courses that physical "contact is very minimal."

But when an employee leaves for a new job, co-workers hug each other freely. "Although you have all these boundaries and rules, suddenly in that moment they seem to disappear," he says.

Parties bring co-workers' personal feelings and friendships to the fore, turning protocol upside down.

When a previous employer threw a going-away party for Phyllis Hartman after she took a new job, she was surprised when dozens of her co-workers lined up to hug her.

As a human-resource executive at the employer, a professional association, she had to be "pretty tough" with some of the employees, enforcing disciplinary rules, says Ms. Hartman, owner of PGHR Consulting in Pittsburgh. Nevertheless, there were hugs all around. "I remember thinking, 'I didn't think that guy even liked me. Maybe he's just happy I'm leaving,'" she says.

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