

# Globe Careers

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 LEGAL RECRUITMENT

**WORKPLACE DECORUM**

## Hurt it through the grapevine

Loose lips have sunk careers, but experts say office gossip can also serve useful purposes

BY JEFF BUCKSTEIN

Loose lips don't only sink ships — they can cost your job, as the experience of four town employees in the United States indicates.

The women — now known as the Hooksett Four after the name of their small town in New Hampshire — were sacked last month after discussing rumours about an alleged affair of a more senior official. The women say they didn't start or spread them — they just talked about them. And now they are fighting to regain their jobs.

There was reason that Allied troops got that loose-lips advice during the Second World War. "Peoples' careers have been killed by untruths that have been passed around, so there is no question that there is a significant downside to gossip," says career expert Barbara Moses, a columnist for The Globe and Mail and the author of *Dish: Midlife Women Tell The Truth about Work, Relationships, and the Rest of Life*.

But gossip can also serve many useful purposes, Dr. Moses says. To her, it's an "art form" that she says "savvy employees should engage in selectively, because it can provide important clues for managing your career effectively."

The trick is to know what kind of chatter is harmful or helpful, and how to participate in gossiping in a career-wise way, the experts say.

"That means knowing who to talk to and what to talk about, and also what to pay attention to," Dr. Moses says.

Merge Gupta-Sunderji, a Calgary-based workplace communication expert, has two rules about when office gossip crosses the line.

"Rule No. 1 — I ask myself the question: 'Could I repeat this information to the person that this information is about?' If the answer is no, then it is gossip," she says.

"The second rule is, if this information were to come to light to the friends, family and loved ones of this individual, would it be hurtful to them? If the answer is yes, then you know you've crossed the line."

Another line not to cross: "When people start spreading rumours or innuendos that aren't true," Dr. Moses adds.

But, just like cholesterol, there are good and bad varieties of gossip. The good kind, Dr. Moses says, accomplishes a few things.

"Gossip is basically sharing of a confidence. When you gossip with someone, the other person will feel privileged to be the recipient of your confidence because it shows you trust them. It also makes us feel like we are in the inner circle, that we are in the know and special."

As well, she says, the "function of gossip is to test out your understanding of the world against that of others. You hate your boss: is she really a bitch? You start sharing confidences and you may find out you're right, or that she's going through a very difficult period and under a lot of stress, which is making her very short-tempered."

Gossip can be "a very impor-



JON FEINGERSH/ZEFA/CORBIS

### Dos and don'ts for the chattering classes

**DO:**

- » Feel free to feed factual information into the grapevine. Unwritten rules, such as boundaries of acceptable dress, or rumours about new projects, are grist for the mill.
- » Read body language to determine people's gossip limits.
- » Understand that men and women often seek out different information and/or interpret gossip differently.
- » Stick to gossiping with people you trust, and people who you think will have an interesting or instructive take on a subject.
- » Watch what you say in an e-mail. There is no such thing as a private e-mail at work.
- » Watch what you say on social networking sites such as Facebook or Myspace or on Internet blogs.
- » Pick your subject matter wisely, remembering that you're in a professional environment.
- » Keep your ear tuned for career-useful information.

tant source of information about how things really get done in an organization," she adds. "I always say to people: 'Pay attention, because it's often through the office grapevine that you learn about what's really important, what the real priorities are, who's going places and what's coming down the pike.'"

If you keep your ear tuned to the office grapevine, you can pick up important, career-enhancing information. For example, you might hear of someone being transferred to another department, which

**DON'T:**

- » Perpetuate hurtful information.
- » Participate in harmful gossip.
- » Imply that you know more than you really do about a co-worker's personal life.
- » Spread malicious rumours about a co-worker or your boss.
- » Repeat anything that you can't verify is 100-per-cent true.
- » Talk about intensely personal things in an office environment, such as your sex life, marital difficulties or a drinking problem, or that of a colleague.
- » Say something at a corporate function that you wouldn't repeat at the office. Remember that social events with colleagues are an extension of the office.

» Jeff Buckstein

can give you the goods to position yourself for the job. "To me, it's a way of being wired," Dr. Moses says.

Gossip can also be a way of comparing experiences in the office and help draw people closer together. For instance, learning that the boss is going through a divorce may help employees realize there is nothing personal in an emotional outburst. Similarly, employees complaining about a peer's performance might be more understanding if they learn the colleague is distracted by a family illness.

Ms. Gupta-Sunderji calls "the company grapevine ... quite possibly the most effective communications tool in the workplace today." When speaking to managers, she often stresses that it is going to exist, so it is best to help individuals "harness its power" by freely sharing information that is not confidential. "There's no such thing as secrets in organizations, so the rumour mill starts up and the grapevine takes over," she says.

But gossiping must be a two-way street. "People will very eagerly take information out of the grapevine, but won't put in anything. Then people won't tell you anything anymore. In order to cultivate the networks of information, you can't just take. You have to give."

You should also be selective about subject matter. "Gossip about who is having an affair is probably not something you should be paying attention to, but gossip about what people are like and how they behave is always interesting and instructive," Dr. Moses says.

Knowing who to speak to can be as important as what to say or not say. Dr. Moses says to confine your chatter to people you trust — and to people who you think might have information worth learning.

"There's no point in gossiping with someone who you don't think has an interesting take on a subject," she says.

Gender differences also have to be taken into account. For example, men are generally more interested in learning about information related to their career, like who is being promoted or being fired. They "feel less comfortable as a recipient of gossip related to people's personal lives."

In contrast, "women seek conversation as a way to create connection and relationships," Ms. Gupta-Sunderji points out.

As a general rule, people are likely to feel more comfortable gossiping with peers than with subordinates or superiors.

Dr. Moses says not everyone is a welcome participant and you can pick up on that through the person's body language. "If you tell them something, and you find they respond abruptly to you or change the subject, they don't probe for more information, then you know that person doesn't take kindly to gossip," so it is probably a good idea to back off.

It's also important to remember to follow the rules on gossip beyond the office walls, at events such as a Christmas party or a picnic.

People should also be very careful about what they say in an e-mail, on public websites or on blogs, the experts warn.

Many people in their late teens and twenties "have a very strong pack mentality and like to share and talk about everything on-line, including their performance reviews and salaries, thoughts about their manager and their thoughts about the organization," says Giselle Kovary, co-founder of Toronto consulting firm n-gen People Performance Inc., which focuses on intergenerational relationships.

And what if you find yourself, like the Hooksett Four, accused of spreading gossip? "You can't deny it, 'fess up," Dr. Moses says. "Sometimes you just have to say, 'I'm sorry, I made a mistake. That was incredibly indiscreet of me.'"

» Special to The Globe and Mail

**GENERATION GAP**

## Boomers: In control and not winning friends

Gen-Xers find older workers a pain to work with: survey

 BY VIRGINIA GALT  
 WORKPLACE REPORTER

AGING baby boomers dominate the work force. They believe rules should be obeyed — unless the rules are contrary to what they want. And they tend to equate hard work with long hours at the office, according to a report released yesterday.

Little wonder, then, that about half of Canada's younger workers find the boomers a pain to work with, according to a survey of more than 2,100 employees conducted by the online jobsite Monster.ca.

"They [Gen-Xers] entered the job market in the wake of the boomers, only to be confronted with new terms like downsizing ... as the economy plunged into recession," the Monster report said. "Gen-Xers scorn the hard-core, super-motivated, do-or-die boomer work ethic. They're not slackers; they just value control of their time, flexibility, and freedom."

It now appears that many boomers, many of whom have risen to supervisory and managerial ranks, have no immediate plans of relinquishing that control, given that mandatory retirement has been abolished in most jurisdictions.

### With a multigenerational work force a reality, employers must develop a generational strategy.

 Gabriel Bouchard,  
 Monster Canada

"This likely means that the boomers will be sticking around the workplace a lot longer, especially in supervisory and management roles, creating a glass ceiling of sorts for Gen-Xers," the Monster report said.

"As a result, the frustration and resentment from which Gen-Xers suffer can easily be directed toward the boomers, and tensions in the workplace ensue."

The boomers' idea of what constitutes a strong work ethic also clashes with younger generations, who do not buy into the concept that you are only working hard if you are seen putting in long hours at the office, according to the survey.

It found that younger generations of employees place a greater value on work-life balance and believe their performance should be judged on results — not time spent.

The oldest employees, born prior to 1945, report relatively few difficulties working with boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), while Gen-Xers (born between 1965 and 1980) and Gen-Ys (born after 1980) experience the most difficulty.

"The chronic labour shortage and the phasing out of mandatory retirement in much of the country has many aging boomers working well into their golden years alongside recent college and university graduates," Gabriel Bouchard, vice-president and general manager of Monster Canada, said in releasing the survey results.

"As diverse generations cross paths on the job, we sometimes see a clash of attitudes, ethics, values and behaviours that can result in misunderstandings and potential conflict," he said.

"With a multigenerational work force a reality, employers must develop a generational strategy."

**IN BRIEF**
**Summer slowdown? Ten ways to motivate workers**

Summertime, and the workin' ain't easy? Here's a top 10 list of ways to keep employees motivated this summer, courtesy of Gevity HR Inc., a Florida-based provider of human resource outsourcing services:

1. Provide a free breakfast or lunch to employees.
2. Create a weekly "wall of fame" with fun photos of employees and accounts of their accomplishments.
3. Each week, choose employees from each department to dine or do an activity with members of management.
4. Give out tickets to movies or sporting or musical events.
5. Hold an employee field day, with fun activities that all em-

ployees can participate in.

6. Create quirky awards for specific achievements.
7. Volunteer to do an employee's least favourite task for a day.
8. Throw a party for your employees, either at the office, a manager's home or at a favourite restaurant.
9. Have a job exchange day, and be sure to include management.
10. Allow employees to work a flexible schedule (taking into consideration the business's needs). Staff

**Boards more trigger-happy at failing CEOs: study**

A study examining turnover among top executives has found that corporate boards

were nearly three times as likely to pull the trigger on failing chief executive officers than they were a decade ago. Nearly one of three chief executives who departed last year was either fired or forced out for performance-related reasons, according to the analysis by management consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton. That compared with roughly one in seven departing executives ousted in 1996. While the study concluded that the wave of executive turnovers appears to have levelled off from its high point last year, shareholders and boards were still keeping the boss on a short leash. "It is really a new peak, and we expect that CEO turnover will remain at that level, roughly

the same level of all employees," said Steven Wheeler, a Booz Allen consultant who helped lead the analysis. At 2,500 of the world's largest public companies, 357 chief executives, or 14.3 per cent, left their jobs in 2006. But performance-related turnover remained high. Some 4.6 per cent of the 357 executives were forced out in 2006, slightly lower than in 2005 but well above the 1.7 per cent a decade earlier. The average chief executive's tenure is just short of eight years. *New York Times*

**Personal touch boosts productivity: poll**

Sixty-seven per cent of senior executives and managers say they believe their organiza-

tions would be more productive if their bosses communicated more often by personal discussion. But the most popular way of communicating is by e-mail, according to a global survey of 155 executives and managers by NFI Research. And 51 per cent said they believed more e-mail communication would help boost productivity, followed by 37 per cent preferring communication by telephone and 30 per cent desiring scheduled meetings, the survey found. "With more and more communication being done electronically, businesses can easily lose that critical, personal touch," warned NFI chief executive officer Chuck Martin. Staff