



UNIT-2

Telephone Skills

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

Unit 2

Telephone Skills

Telephone Usage

Telephone Manners

For the administrative assistant, a pleasant telephone manner and professional demeanour are of the utmost importance. When you cannot physically be seen by the person you are dealing with, you will be judged entirely by what you say and the way you say it. Hence, your telephone manner and your general ability to communicate by telephone will have a marked impact on your performance and your reputation.

As a rule of thumb, every telephone call should be answered as promptly as possible. Any delays could automatically put the caller in a less-than amicable mood. Always ensure you have a pen and paper within reach when you answer the phone. If you are unable to resolve the caller's issues or answer their questions right away, offer to call them back. Unless absolutely necessary, avoid putting callers on hold for extended periods of time, as doing so almost always prompts irritation and anger.

From your first day on the job, make the effort to familiarise yourself with the answers to the most common questions you are likely to encounter. Examples of which may be directions to your office, policies regarding the services you offer and what to do in the case of everyday complaints. You should also learn how your office's telephone systems work, so you can ensure every caller is transferred to the appropriate party as promptly as possible.

Taking and Transferring Calls

As a rule of thumb, all telephone calls should be answered by providing the name of the organization your work for and your own name. For example: "Thank you for calling Walter & White solicitors, you're speaking with Erica". It may also be company policy to state the department you work for, if the organization is comparatively large. Or, for example, if you work in a hotel, where you may be required to indicate the caller has reached the housekeeping department, the bar and restaurant, the reception desk and so on. Again, ensure you know how to promptly transfer calls to all departments and individuals within your organisation.

Answering a Colleague's Telephone

If you are required to answer a colleague's telephone, it is usually necessary to indicate whose telephone it is and who is answering it at the time. For example: "Mr. Anderson's office, Mr. Jones

speaking.” This way, you will eliminate any confusion on the part of the caller, with regard to who they are speaking to. If you are unable to handle their query directly, take a detailed message and ensure it is passed on to the appropriate party at the earliest possible juncture.

Transferring a Call

Always inform callers of your intention to transfer them, rather than simply putting them on hold and diverting them elsewhere. If it’s possible for the caller to reach the relevant department directly, provide them with the appropriate telephone number to simplify things next time they call. When transferring calls, it’s also advisable (where possible) to inform the recipient of the call who’s calling them and why. For example: “I have Mrs. Franklin on the line, and she wants to discuss an insurance renewal.” In the event that you don’t know who to transfer any given call to, don’t keep the caller wait on the line. Tell them you will get the appropriate person to call them back, and make it your priority to do so immediately.

Handling Your Boss’s Calls

If you are required to handle calls on behalf of your boss, you will again need to ensure the caller knows who they are dealing with. In addition, nobody should be transferred directly to your boss, without first establishing who they are and why it is they are calling. You may find that the vast majority of people who intend to speak to your boss directly can actually deal with you instead. Your boss will specify which calls should be transferred account which should be screened, though it will ultimately be up to your judgment to decide who gets through and who doesn’t.

Staff Training Solutions

You may also find that your boss frequently asks you to make calls on his or her behalf, which will result in being held back by ‘gatekeepers’. Or to put it another way, the people you reach may be unwilling to put you through to *their* bosses respectively. Irrespective of how frustrating any calls become, it’s important to conduct yourself with dignity and remember that you are a direct representative of your boss *and* the business as a whole. Don’t make things up if you don’t know the answer to a question - it’s better to find out for sure and call them back later.

Taking Messages

It’s becoming rare these days for businesses to operate with a centralised voice-mail system or switchboard. Instead, it is the responsibility of the administrative assistant to take messages and ensure they receive the relevant parties. When taking a message, you should always include the name of the caller, the time and date of the call, who they were trying to reach and their reason for calling. However, it’s not uncommon for callers to refuse to clarify the intentions of their call, if the matter is personal or private.

When a caller *does* leave a specific message for another party, you need to ensure it is recorded precisely and to the letter. Along with writing the message down, it’s a good idea to then repeat it

back to the caller, in order for them to verify its accuracy. It's important to remember that even the slightest miscommunication in your written message could completely transform the meaning of the message. If there are any terms or references you are unfamiliar with in the message, don't be afraid to ask the caller how to spell them. This includes the caller's name, if you're unfamiliar with it.

Rather than recording messages on random bits of paper all over the place, it's far better to keep an organized daily record. Better yet, a book that automatically creates a carbon copy of every message you take. This way, you can provide the intended recipient with a copy of the message, while retaining a second copy for future reference.

The easiest way to ensure all telephone messages are recorded appropriately is to create and print a template. The template should include headers and spaces for the name of the person calling, the name of their organization or company (if applicable), the time and date of the message, who they were trying to get hold of and the message they would like to leave. It's then a case of signing the message with your initials and ensuring it is passed on to the appropriate recipient.

Screening Calls

As already touched upon, there will be plenty of calls directed at your boss, which for one reason or another should not be put directly through to their telephone. When you intercept a call and decide not to transfer or indirectly, this is known as screening.

Unsurprisingly, screening calls in a manner that keeps all parties happy can be challenging at the best of times. In some instances, the party that wishes to speak to your boss could be incredibly insistent, perhaps even rude or aggressive. They may also become offended by the fact that you are not willing to put them through at the time of their call.

In all instances, you need to explain politely and professionally that your boss is unable to take their call at the moment, but you will be happy to pass on a message and request a call-back. After which, it technically becomes the responsibility of your boss to deal with the party in question, unless they directly request that you call them back yourself. Your boss will explain to you which calls should and should not be screened, but you it can always put the caller on hold and ask your boss at the time, if unsure.

Courtesy

The importance of courtesy when handling telephone communications cannot be overstated. All of which begins by ensuring you answer every call as quickly as possible, while maintaining a pleasant and patient tone of voice. When you are conversing by telephone with a caller, they should be

given your absolute priority from start to finish. Never put them on hold so that you can address other tasks, or give the impression that you are in any way distracted. You should treat them as if their time is the most important thing in the world. And remember that the customer/client is always right, even when they're wrong!

Under no circumstances should you ever put a caller on hold, without first requesting their permission to do so. If they are unwilling to be put on hold, you can offer to call them back, or have the party they are trying to contact do so on your behalf. Try to remember that a lot of callers would prefer to be called back, rather than wasting their time on hold while you attempt to find answers to their questions.

Telephone Etiquette Tips

For the most part, telephone etiquette is a matter of basic common sense. Not to mention, putting yourself in the position of the caller and considering how you would expect to be treated.

The following telephone etiquette tips represent the most important cornerstones of effective and professional telephone communications:

1. Ensure distractions are kept to an absolute minimum, providing the caller with 100% of your time and focus throughout the call.
2. Make sure you always have a pen and paper nearby to take messages.
3. Answer every call as promptly as possible - anything more than four rings and the caller could already be in a bad mood.
4. Strange as it may sound, it's a good idea to smile when answering a telephone call. This will naturally prompt you to speak in a polite and welcoming manner.
5. Be respectful, enthusiastic and welcoming at all times.
6. Don't forget to announce the name of the business you represent and your own name at the beginning of the call.
7. Ask the caller, "To whom am I speaking?", if it isn't made clear.
8. Ask the caller, "How may I help you?"
9. Avoid unnecessary jargon and complex language in your conversations.
10. Use the caller's name in your conversation, calling them Mr, Miss or Mrs, followed by their surname.
11. Practice good listening skills.
12. If there is a problem, be concerned, empathetic, and apologetic.
13. Thank the caller for calling. Ask the caller to call again.
14. Never eat, drink, or chew gum while you are on a call.
15. Irrespective of whether you believe the caller's requests and requirements are nonsensical and a waste of time, they must still be shown nothing but respect and courtesy.

Often-Used Numbers

The vast majority of office telephone systems these days have in-built speed dial functions. If using computerised telephone systems, pretty much every telephone number you will ever need will be right there in front of you. It's becoming less of a requirement to memorise often-used numbers, though it can be beneficial to do so. If you do not have access to speed dial systems or a computerised directory, you'll need to manually produce a list of telephone numbers used most frequently.

Telephone Companies

It's entirely likely that your only communication with your company's telephone service provider will be to pay monthly/quarterly bills. However, it may be your responsibility to contact the telephone company, in the event that functionality of the telephone service provided becomes dissatisfactory. If calls are frequently being cut off or the general quality of the sound is unacceptable, you may need to contact the telephone company.

Local and National Calls

The vast majority of telephone companies in the United Kingdom now charge local and national calls at the same rate. However, you will need to speak to your provider directly to confirm this, as call charges vary from one telephone company and subscription package to the next. You may play a role in determining which subscription package is most suitable for your business, in accordance with the nature and duration of the calls you make on a daily basis.

International Long-Distance Calls

International call costs vary significantly from one country to the next, so again should be discussed with your telephone service provider for clarification. Making an international call from the United Kingdom means first dialling zero zero '00', followed by the two or three-digit country code as listed below (correct at the time of writing) and finally the telephone number itself.

TABLE 2.2 International Country Codes

Country Name	Country Code	Country Name	Country Code
Afghanistan	93	Bhutan	975
Albania	355	Bolivia	591
Algeria	213	Bosnia & Herzegovina	387
Andorra	376	Botswana	267
Angola	244	Brazil	55
Antarctica	672	Brunei	673
Argentina	54	Bulgaria	359
Armenia	374	Burkina Faso	226
Aruba	97	Burundi	257
Ascension Island	247	Cambodia	855
Australia	61	Cameroon	237
Austria	43	Canada	1
Azerbaijan	994	Cape Verde Islands	238
Bahrain	973	Central African Republic	236
Bangladesh	880	Chad	235
Belarus	375	Chatham Island (New Zealand)	64
Belgium	32	Chile	56
Belize	501	China (People's Republic)	86
Benin	229	Christmas Island	61

Country Name	Country Code	Country Name	Country Code
Cocos-Keeling Islands	61	Global Mobile Satellite System (GMSS)	881
Colombia	57	Greece	30
Comoros	269	Greenland	299
Cook Islands	682		

Costa Rica	506	Guadeloupe	590
Croatia	385	Guantanamo Bay	5399
Cuba	53	Guatemala	502
Curaçao	599	Guinea (PRP)	224
Cyprus	357	Guinea-Bissau	245
Czech Republic	420	Guyana	592
Democratic Republic of the Congo	242	Haiti	509
Denmark	45	Honduras	504
Diego Garcia	246	Hong Kong	852
Djibouti	253	Hungary	36
East Timor (<i>Timor- Leste</i>)	670	Iceland	354
Easter Island	56	India	91
Ecuador	593	Indonesia	62
Egypt	20	Inmarsat (<i>Atlantic Ocean - East</i>)	871
El Salvador	503	Inmarsat (<i>Atlantic Ocean - West</i>)	874
EMSAT (<i>Mobile Satellite Service</i>)88213		Inmarsat (<i>Indian Ocean</i>)	873
Equatorial Guinea	240	Inmarsat (<i>Pacific Ocean</i>)	872
Eritrea	291	Inmarsat SNAC	870
Estonia	372	Iran	98
Ethiopia	251	Iraq	964
Faeroe Islands	298	Ireland	353
Falkland Islands	500	Israel	972
Fiji Islands	679	Italy	39
Finland	358	Ivory Coast (<i>Côte d'Ivoire</i>)	225
France	33	Japan	81
French Antilles	596	Jordan	962
French Guiana	594	Kazakhstan	7
French Polynesia	689	Kenya	254
Gabon	241	Kiribati	686
Gambia	220	Korea (<i>North</i>)	850
Gaza Strip	970	Korea (<i>South</i>)	82
		Kosovo	381
		Kuwait	965

Georgia	995	Kyrgyz Republic	996
Germany	49	Laos	856
Ghana	233	Latvia	371
Gibraltar	350	Lebanon	961

(continued)

Country Name	Country Code	Country Name	Country Code
Lesotho	266	Oman	968
Liberia	231	Pakistan	92
Libya	218	Palau	680
Liechtenstein	423	Palestine	970
Lithuania	370	Panama	507
Luxembourg	352	Papua New Guinea	675
Macau	853	Paraguay	595
Macedonia (<i>formerly Yugoslav Republic</i>)	389	Peru	51
Madagascar	261	Philippines	63
Malawi	265	Pitcairn Islands	870
Malaysia	60	Poland	48
Maldives	960	Portugal	351
Mali Republic	223	Qatar	974
Malta	356	Réunion Island	262
Marshall Islands	692	Romania	40
Martinique	596	Russia	7
Mauritania	222	Rwanda	250
Mauritius	230	St. Helena	290
Mayotte Island	269	St. Pierre & Miquelon	508
Mexico	52	San Marino	378
Micronesia (<i>Federal States of</i>)	691	São Tomé & Príncipe	239
Moldova	373	Saudi Arabia	966
Monaco	377	Senegal	221
Mongolia	976	Serbia	381
Morocco	212	Seychelles Islands	248
		Sierra Leone	232

Mozambique	258	Singapore	65
Myanmar	95	Slovak Republic	421
Namibia	264	Slovenia	386
Nauru	674	Solomon Islands	677
Nepal	977	Somalia	252
Netherlands	31	South Africa	27
Netherlands Antilles	599	Spain	34
New Caledonia	687	Sri Lanka	94
New Zealand	64	Sudan/South Sudan	249
Nicaragua	505	Suriname	597
Niger	227	Swaziland	268
Nigeria	234	Sweden	46
Niue	683	Switzerland	41
Norfolk Island	672	Syria	963
Norway	47	Taiwan	886

Country Name	Country Code	Country Name	Country Code
Tajikistan	992	Universal Personal Telecommunications (UPT)	878
Tanzania	255	Uruguay	598
Thailand	66	Uzbekistan	998
Thuraya (Mobile Satellite Service) 88216		Vanuatu	678
Togo	228	Vatican City	39
Tokelau	690	Venezuela	58
Tonga Islands	676	Vietnam	84
Tunisia	216	Wake Island	808
Turkey	90	Wallis & Futuna Islands	681
Turkmenistan	993	West Bank	970
Tuvalu	688	Western Samoa	685
Uganda	256	Yemen	967
Ukraine	380	Zambia	260
United Arab Emirates	971	Zanzibar	255
United Kingdom	44	Zimbabwe	263
United States of America	1		

Voice-Mail Etiquette

Voice-mail etiquette is slightly different to conventional telephone etiquette, in that you aren't actually conversing with the other person directly. Instead, you are speaking with a machine - an automated system that will be used to pass your message on to the appropriate recipient.

There's little more frustrating than receiving a nonsensical voice-mail message you simply cannot understand the point of. The same also goes for a voice-mail message that comes across as aggressive, rude or ill-tempered. The problem being that some people automatically feel annoyed and inconvenienced, when their calls are answered by a messaging system.

As an administrative assistant, you will be required to leave voicemail messages on a regular basis. As such, it is worth considering the following basic rules of good voice-mail etiquette, which will help you keep the intended recipient happy:

- Make every effort to ensure that your message is as clear and concise as possible, without going into too much detail.
- Don't just assume the recipient has your telephone number - make sure it is included in your message.
- Likewise, don't simply assume that they will recognise your voice - let them know who you are and what you want.
- Indicate when you will be able to take the recipient's return call.
- Only if the matter is genuinely urgent should you indicate as such. Far too many callers suggest it's an urgent matter, simply to ensure a prompt response.
- If the matter isn't strictly urgent, don't expect a response right away.
- Always remember that messages can and do get lost in the system. Don't lose your temper if they don't get back to you promptly, or even at all.
- Under no circumstances should any sensitive or personal information ever be left on a voice-mail system of any kind.
- If necessary, write a note of the information you wish to leave as a message, in order to keep the content of the message concise and clear.

If your office has voice mail available, you should observe the following guidelines:

- Record a greeting that is short, clear and indicative of which desk at the caller has reached.
- Indicate (where relevant) the best time to call you back, or your general office hours.
- If you are frequently away from your desk, update your greeting on a regular basis with important information accordingly.

- Ensure your greeting is as friendly and professional as your general telephone manner.
- If you set up a voicemail system, you cannot get frustrated or annoyed when inundated with messages. You simply have to deal with them.
- Never use voice-mail to avoid interaction. Ensure all messages are acted on and responded to as promptly as possible.
- Don't act on any information that is incomplete or not clear. Call them back for clarification.
- Do your best to return calls at convenient and appropriate times of day where possible.
- If you may not be able to resolve the caller's query for some time, call them back anyway and let them know you are working on it.

Answering Services

Some companies prefer to use specialist call answering services, rather than in-house switchboards or voice-mail systems. Whenever you are away from your desk - including outside your normal office hours - the answering service will answer your calls on your behalf, providing detailed messages upon your return. However, in-house messaging systems are far more commonplace than the use of external answering services for the modern business.

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Further Reading: