

HELPFUL NOTES FROM NICK, VOL. 3: PERKS & REPRESENTATION

WRITTEN BY **Nick Bachan** | MAY 17, 2016

Advice columns go way back, apparently.

This [2015 piece](#) from *The Atlantic* includes some questions submitted to a 1690s British periodical called *The Athenian Mercury*. Based on the examples below, the inquiries of literate intellectuals at the time ranged from casual planetary colorism to questions that could have been written by dogs and/or infants.

- “Why is thunder more terrible in the night time?”
- “If the light of the moon is borrowed from the sun, why are they so differing in complexion?”
- “Dancing, is it lawful?”

We’ve come a *longish* way since such inquiries ruled the day, but we’re still sorting a lot of things out via channels that transcend the traditional periodical (with varying levels of success). In any case, I’m happy we at least got on the same page with regard to [lawful dancing](#).

In service of the constant quest for answers, I’m excited to address this latest batch of inquiries because they originate from a variety of perspectives and address everything from top-secret babies to not-so-secret hiring norms. Enjoy!

BAD TIMING

Dear Nick,

My coworker loudly proclaims the time, often several times a day. It’s 11:00! It’s 4:20! We all have iPhones and stare at computers. Frankly, I don’t want to always know the time. Should I hide the clocks?

Sincerely,

Too much time on my hands

Dear chronologically tortured,

This isn’t as much about the visibility of clocks as it is about your coworker’s approach to social interactions. It sounds like this person is a proclaimer in more ways than one. Announcing the time is a form of social currency that makes him or her a part of everyone’s day.

In this particular case, everyone is forced to react because who *isn’t* already thinking about the passage of time in some way, shape or form? Between push notifications, meeting alerts, project deadlines, and alarms we forgot we set yesterday, we’re [always](#) being reminded of the time in subtle ways, especially at work.

If it’s your coworker’s intention to keep people “on track” with these announcements, it may be a form of micromanagement. If this seems to be the case, it’s perfectly acceptable to kindly remind this person that their strategy is both ineffective and outside his or her jurisdiction. If you are non-confrontational (like I most definitely am), communicate your [concerns](#) to a manager either individually or as a part of a group. If this issue is as pervasive as it reads in your submitted question, I *promise* it’s not just you who would benefit from something being said to your coworker.

If it turns out that your frustration isn't shared, it may be worth your time to figure out why you have a particularly sensitive aversion to your coworker's quirk. Try allowing your mind to process your reaction when your coworker proclaims the time. Are you procrastinating on your work? Do you just want the workday to be over? Are you stretching yourself too thin and always running a bit behind? Remember that your first instinct was to hide the clocks.

Even if there's no deeper personal source of anxiety here, your surface-level frustration is warranted. As I type this, the mere *idea* of someone announcing the time with no previously established context is driving me slightly coconuts.

BOUND BY BOOZE

Dear Nick,

My company is very generous. They're always throwing us lavish parties and happy hours, and these almost always involve a whole lot of free alcohol. I want to relax with my colleagues, but for a variety of reasons, I don't like to drink. How can I demonstrate my gratitude and fit in with the team without ostracizing myself socially as a non-drinker?

Sincerely,
Sober team player

Dear deliberately underserved,

Isn't it annoying how so much of life can just feel like college all over again?

I'm not a huge drinker, either, and I ALSO HAVE MY REASONS. My apologies if my all-caps tone seems defensive. I, just like you, have been conditioned to "explain myself" in certain ways when my behavior is not what the popular vote deems *ideal*. I get by just fine, though, and so can you.

The key is maintaining your integrity and disclosing your non-drinking preference if anyone asks why you're holding a cup of water or ginger ale. Speaking from experience, the short-term strategy of insincerely saying something like "Oh, I'm on a cleanse" establishes a barrier between the real you and your team. Remember that the essence of perks like work happy hours is the opportunity to genuinely bond with your team. It may seem like the peer pressure to booze it up and engage in conventional debauchery is insurmountable, but it is so much more fulfilling in all aspects of life to *just be yourself*.

In terms of gratitude, you demonstrate this simply by showing up and participating both professionally and socially. If you're present in a physical sense at company events, you're going to be perceived as a good employee—so don't worry about that. The real goals here are to feel comfortable in your skin and to socialize with people with whom you truly connect. The fear of being ostracized will immediately go away once you remember that you have a lot of unique things to offer. If you navigate your professional life with this in mind, you will very likely find people in situations that resemble yours. Not everyone is the same, but I don't need to tell you that.

In keeping with "life as college" logic, anyone who is *actually* going to make a value judgment based on your dislike for consuming alcoholic beverages has way more to work out internally than you do. If the company *itself* seems to be making that value judgment, it may not be the best environment for you, anyway. The career pressure here can be real because you may feel as though changing your lifestyle comes with the ladder-climbing territory, but performing in any way just to gain external validation is something that will leave you feeling more exhausted than fulfilled.

If you show up and just tell people who you are, you can sip on whatever beverage you choose and trust that you're on the right path to finding meaningful connections.

JUST ENOUGH INFORMATION

Dear Nick,

I recently became a surrogate mother for a couple I've known for years. It's getting to the point where my coworkers are going to notice my pregnancy, but the details are complicated, and frankly, none of their business. How do I deftly explain the situation without providing too much information, or inviting unwanted questions?

*Sincerely,
Privately pregnant*

Dear not-expected-to-be-expecting,

Congratulations! You must have embarked on quite an emotional journey to make this decision, and I hope that you are feeling both healthy and happy.

If you happen to be Kerry Washington and your coworkers happen to be the cast of *Scandal*, I suggest collaborating with the costume department to establish a steady rotation of large dresses and purses that you can start sporting both on and off camera for the next several months. If you are not Kerry Washington, I hope what I suggested above was at least a fun imaginary scenario.

Since the details of your situation are [hopefully not too] complicated, the best thing to do is communicate what's going on in a way that doesn't prompt too many follow-up questions. I would suggest composing a friendly email and sending it out on Friday afternoon just after lunch. No-one's eager to contribute to an email chain that starts on a Friday afternoon. People will also have clear inboxes and hopefully only brief, kind words to send back to you. If those words are not kind or too inquisitive, TGIF. The beauty of weekends is that they allow for everyone to internalize things long before the Monday reset comes around.

It's difficult for personal matters—especially those that will affect your health and body in very direct ways—to not influence people's perceptions in the workplace. The added complexity here is that some people may make certain observations about what they deem an “unconventional” situation and treat you differently because of that.

I urge you to be the big person in potentially negative interactions (no pregnancy pun intended) and revert to professionalism. What you're doing is great and completely your choice. Whatever complicated circumstances you're already addressing need not be exacerbated by the way our peers' perceptions can become reality. This is a worst-case scenario, though. Best-case, people celebrate your news and only ask you the exciting kinds of questions. Even then, it's always an option to declare blanket privacy and to change the subject to the weather.

Once you've hit “Send” on that Friday afternoon email, your work at work is done in terms of communicating the nature of your situation.

MORE THAN MERIT

Dear Nick,

I work for a small web development company. Out of twelve total employees, I'm the only woman and the only person of color.

I'm new to the field and my colleagues have mostly been very supportive, welcoming and kind. I think I've really found a niche in web development, and my contributions feel valued here.

Recently, however, we've been looking to hire another developer and I'm not sure my coworkers see our lack of diversity for the problem that it is. I'm worried that if I bring it up in the wrong way, they'll assume that I'm unhappy, or feel defensive.

I've been trying to encourage the hiring manager to consider more non-white-dude candidates but tend to be met with, “there just aren't very many women or non-white people in the field” or “we're going to hire the most qualified candidate regardless.”

How do I get my managers to understand that greater diversity would be an asset to our organization?

Sincerely,
Representation representative

Dear appropriately concerned,

I'm a West Indian living and working in central Texas. There are communities of West Indian people in certain pockets of the United States, but I don't live in one of those communities. My sense of belonging often comes from shared social experiences with my peers as opposed to direct, sustained reminders of my cultural heritage. In a way, I'm grateful that my path to finding my identity has not exclusively been tied to my cultural roots.

In another way, though, I'm often disheartened to find that I am the only one in the room who's like me. I'm often among (very smart and talented) people who have either a central Texan or "generally American" background. I am often a novelty (whether this is implicit or explicit), and that's usually as liberating as it is restricting.

Your question and your situation made me go through a range of emotions. My first instinct was "They should understand! Diversity seems beneficial in any industry!" Then, the ways of the world we live in—particularly the tech world—crept back into my consciousness. You are a woman of color in a male-dominated field that mostly features males who are not people of color. In so many frustrating ways, the demographic table has been set and the metric for "normal" has been established.

What's even worse is that mere gestures aimed at improving diversity are often not enough to remedy this definition of what is standard protocol.

The faces behind shifts in many industries are still largely white and male, even when nobody is being overtly oppressive within that context. If everyone is accustomed to one narrative, it's difficult to change it. You are demonstrating an awareness of a demographic bias, and you should definitely voice that.

If you're being challenged, silenced, or laughed off, you can at least feel reassured regarding your instincts and environmental assessment. In an ideal scenario, everyone will be open-minded and equally aware as you are of the need for some more balance. Building a climate that welcomes this requires sustained participation from current gatekeepers working in direct partnership with people like you, who are intimately invested in forward movement. In pitching your cause, framing the issue from a business perspective may help. To put the matter in its coldest terms, a more diverse collection of knowledge and experiences will likely boost innovation and increase profits.

Merit-based advancement usually exists within established circles of privilege. When these circles are formed based on race, gender, and economic access, biases become evident. Recognition of this is important. So in terms of an action plan, I would put numbers and examples behind your reasoning that diversity is an asset, and present that to your management staff. The selection pool may be limited due to barriers society allows to exist, but broadening that pool of candidates is hugely important in changing the professional landscape. A productive route for you would be to focus on changing minds slowly and meaningfully as you work with management to actively seek candidates in traditionally ignored spaces.

In summation, they'll probably hire another white dude for the open role, so you may need to focus on the long term to see any gains here. Just know that your insights and feelings are tremendously valid and begging to be expressed.

ONE TOO MANY

Dear Nick,

I'm super hungover at work today and feeling nauseated and cloudy. My brain is barely working—I just spelled "barely" wrong.

I feel bad being here, getting paid for doing subpar work, and sitting at my desk trying not to puke. I get paid hourly. I also don't want to go home, though, and leave my coworkers in the lurch. And on top of it all, I just feel dishonest trying to hide it from my boss.

Should I stay? Should I go? Is it OK to just sit here and breathe slowly through my nose?

Sincerely,

Waiting for the sweet release of death

Dear present but not present,

Go home! Turn back! Take a personal day! Nauseated and cloudy are listed as both symptoms and side effects of so many awful things!

Now I'll compose myself and provide a more rational response.

Success in most jobs is tied to our basic ability to function as a human while doing those jobs. I hate to sound like a parent, but it simply isn't responsible or in your best interest to send emails while your natural autocorrect is on the fritz. I know that there's a paycheck attached that you for sure need, but compromising that source of income in the long-term is dangerous. More importantly, subpar work yields subpar career statuses, whether you mean to be perceived as complacent or not. Ugh, I still sound parental, but it's only because I know the feeling you're describing.

I've never been hungover at work, but I have fallen asleep on the job/on my keyboard/on my dreams. It's a lousy recovery and there's no way to remedy personal disappointment (except by drinking, but in this particular circumstance I would not suggest that).

Take a moment in the form of a personal day and be prepared to come back with a non-nausea-having vengeance! You may lose some bucks, but you will have opportunities to have more structured fun in the future (you know, where hangovers don't coincide with weekdays) if you prioritize job security and the mild respect of your coworkers.

I know, right? Unstructured fun could not sound *more* fun right now.

Thank you for sharing and reading! Please continue to send all of your personal and professional quandaries to NickHelps@mathys-potestio.com.

Here to help,
Nick

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