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At work, political gab is gaining acceptance

By Sara Ganus
Business Writer

Somewhere along the way, someone probably told you that religion and politics are off limits, especially in the workplace.

Well, times have changed.

With today's Super Tuesday primaries and the upcoming presidential election, partisan chat, at least, is no longer considered taboo at the office, according to a new survey by Menlo Park, Calif.-based OfficeTeam, a specialized temporary staffing service for administrative professionals.

Based on telephone interviews with 522 adult workers employed in an office environment, the survey revealed that nearly 81 percent indicated that it's acceptable — to some degree — to discuss politics at work.

Nearly four in 10 of the respondents said discussing political campaigns and candidates is common practice.

While the results may surprise some employees, Oklahoma City's OfficeTeam division director said more and more people are building closer relationships with their co-workers, which leads to more personal discussions — politics included.

The workplace also is where people spend the most time.

"A lot of the (political) information comes out through the Internet, and you find out about it during the day instead of at home in the evenings," said Valerie Forsythe of OfficeTeam. "It tends to be a little bit more tempting to discuss it while you're at work."

Forsythe said that just last week, Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee made a campaign stop downtown, just outside OfficeTeam's Oklahoma City office, which created a buzz.

"Even here, we catch ourselves," she said.

Kris Rush, director of the Oklahoma Prosperity Project, the state's nonpartisan, election education service, said political discussions are actually healthy for the workplace, where employees often turn to their employers for information on Election Day.

"All of the surveys that have been done for years show that employees rank their employers as the single most credible source of election information they receive," Rush said. "And as a matter of fact, they want it.



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They welcome it, and they want it.”

Launched in 2004, the Oklahoma Prosperity Project encourages employees to register to vote, stay informed and vote on election days and offers companies free election education programming.

More than 1,000 companies, which represent 423,000 employees in Oklahoma, are involved in the project.

“The good news is employers are no longer afraid to talk about politics at work,” Rush said.

But before you figure out who's voting for whom in your office, proceed with caution, etiquette expert Rachel Wagner said.

“It's like a minefield to talk about politics in the workplace,” said Wagner, director of Rachel Wagner Etiquette and Protocol in Broken Arrow.

Whether someone has a political one-liner they want to share or a co-worker tends to send political jokes via e-mail, the appropriate nature usually falls on their workplace culture, Wagner said.

“It's certainly more acceptable,” she said. “But I think where the rubber hits the road sometimes depends on the culture of an office — how much people should promote their views and how much they should just keep their mouths closed.”

Promoting candidates or a certain party in a way that makes a certain employee stand out as an office maverick could be “career suicide,” Wagner said. Pushing views onto someone else — employee or co-worker — also is inappropriate.

“The main thing here is to just really be respectful and just show sensitivity because you want to use common sense and show restraint,” she said.

“The bottom line is if the boat isn't rocking, don't rock it. If there's no political debate going on, don't create it.”