

Relinquish Relics



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Last week I was reminded of a *relic* from the ‘before times’ when a colleague asked me about ordering business cards for our newest team member. The arrival of these tiny cards—descendants of calling cards used by [aristocrats in 17th century Europe](#)—has been a symbol of being a member of our team. But like other relics—outdated, outmoded objects, customs, or beliefs leftover from an earlier time—it’s time to let go of our paper calling cards.

Business cards. Save a tree and stop printing these old-fashioned symbols of being a legitimate employee at your nonprofit. Encourage staff to share contact information via email, text, SMS, or MMS. Bonus benefit: eliminate the guilt that team members feel when they toss a recently presented business card or stash it away in a junk drawer.

The Handshake. In the podcast [“Stuff that Changed the World: the handshake,”](#) Simon Tierney explains that the handshake began as early as the 10th century as a gesture indicating a peace offering; one could assume that when the initiator presented their empty ‘weapon hand’ no hostile intentions were in mind. The global pandemic has taught us that we don’t need to shake hands when we meet someone. Some of us began tapping elbows, while others discovered that an enthusiastic “Hello, it’s nice to meet you!” works beautifully for an introduction. Bonus benefit: if you’ve ever winced after a bone-crushing handshake, fear no more.

Dress the Part. Many colleagues in my generation recall receiving advice from a parent or friend to “dress the part,” a phrase defined by Merriam-Webster as “to dress the way that people in a particular role usually dress.” Before leaving home to attend a meeting, conference, or meet new colleagues, I frequently reflected on what would be expected and how people would expect someone in my position to appear. I often chose solid-color power suits, sturdy heels, and modest jewelry. One of the surprising silver linings of the pandemic has been the realization that it doesn’t matter what you’re wearing, only that you’re wearing something. We need to stop associating an expensive suit with competence and commitment and train teams to value each human colleague’s unique perspectives, talents, and contributions.

Resumes. Early in my career, I worked for an association where I managed an executive leadership program whose graduates were sought after by headhunters trying to fill open positions. After reluctantly forwarding a poorly written resume to a search firm, I dreamt up a new offering, the “Top Hat Resume Service.” For a flat fee, I would rewrite a member’s resume and print copies on high-quality cream-colored stationery. The members

would receive a package containing their unrecognizable resumes, blank paper for cover letters, and matching envelopes in a ribbon-wrapped black box. At NRMCMC, we stopped collecting applicant resumes 10 years ago.

From my personal experience as a resume rewriter, I know that resumes often disappoint, and there's no telling whether the content was crafted by the candidate, written by a friend, or copied and pasted from a resume app. We use a custom online application for each open position and encourage our clients to do the same. The questions we ask are specifically relevant to the open position, and the tool we use allows us to export the answers into a spreadsheet, making a side-by-side evaluation of the applicants an uncomplicated task. We take our evaluation one step farther by hiding first and last names in our initial data dump to reduce bias. And we refrain from looking at a candidate's social media accounts until after making an offer of employment.

Mixed Messages. Another relic worthy of banishment is the practice of sending mixed messages. Examples of painful and consequential mixed messages include:

- "We trust you, but if you resign, we will send you packing immediately." Except for those rare instances of termination due to theft or egregious conduct, resigning employees should be thanked and properly feted before they leave the premises. If your team is virtual, find a way to host a warm send-off. Wish your colleague well and invite them to share candid feedback on their role and the organization. What would they change if they were the CEO? What would have made their experience on the team more enjoyable or meaningful? Would they enthusiastically recommend the nonprofit as a great place to work—why or why not?
- "We strive to empower employees at all levels, and inclusion is a value we hold dear, but make sure you go through the proper channels if you want to speak with a senior leader other than your supervisor." I'm often surprised to encounter rigid, formal structures in nonprofit organizations that capably convey a warm, welcoming tone in their public-facing communications. Junior and front-line staff in these organizations often feel that espoused values are intended to impress external stakeholders rather than empower those who bring the mission to life.

As you toss the leftover relics from the 'before times' at your nonprofit, I hope you'll commit to embracing new customs and beliefs that better suit the mission of your nonprofit and the workplace culture you want to nurture. From "welcome to our team" care packages to celebratory pauses after a successful initiative wraps to 'stay interviews' with staff that occur during the year, find ways to express your appreciation for the intellectual talents, enthusiasm, and patience that your colleagues bring to work every day.

Read more from NRMCMC about Risk Relics you can let go of this year

- ["Toss the Register, Make a Plan"](#)
- ["Something Old, Something New"](#)
- ["Not So Great Governance? Resolve to Reinvent the Board"](#)
- ["Book Smart: Lessons from a Year of Reading Well"](#)
- ["Make Mission Magic by Tidying Up"](#)
- ["Elastic: Flexible Thinking in a Time of Change"](#)

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions and stories about relinquishing risk relics at your organization at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.