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Should office meetings be phone-free?

Like the Catholic cardinals, more businesses are banning electronic devices during meetings

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You may not have the opportunity to choose the next pope. But your next office meeting may be a lot like the papal conclave — even if it doesn't include lace-trimmed cloaks and scarlet red sashes — as more companies try to establish no-smartphone zones during important meetings.



Cardinals celebrate final Mass before conclave

Cardinals celebrated a final Mass before sequestering themselves in the Sistine Chapel for the conclave to elect the next pope. Photo: Getty

Under rules announced by Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi last Friday, the only signals that will emanate from the Sistine Chapel this week will be smoke. As cardinals from all over the world gather to decide on the successor to Pope Benedict XVI, the use of cellphones is strictly forbidden. The Vatican has reportedly installed jamming devices to prevent cardinals from using their cellphones to text or — Heaven forbid — tweet the result of the vote before the appearance of the white smoke that proclaims the selection of the new pope.

Those working with the cardinals have also taken an oath of secrecy. "In this electronic age, I worry some cardinals may go into iPad and Twitter withdrawal," Sister Mary Ann Walsh, media relations director for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, wrote on her organization's blog. Indeed, there have been leaks in the run-up to the vote, and before the conclave, the U.S. delegation suspended its daily media briefing. "Due to concerns over accounts being reported in the Italian press, which breached confidentiality, the College of Cardinals has agreed not to give interviews," Sister Walsh said in a statement.

Call it the cardinal rule: The digital wall of silence surrounding the papal conclave may be catching on in the corporate world, as well. "We will see a whole new set of rules about how people work and communicate," says David Grossman, founder and CEO of The Grossman Group, a communications consultancy in Chicago. Senior managers attending a recent meeting at a global consumer packaging company were asked to leave their cellphones behind because a significant change was being announced, Grossman says.

When public companies have meetings discussing acquisitions, lawyers increasingly recommend that no cellphones be allowed, says Peter Handal, CEO of Dale Carnegie Training. "They're very sensitive about word getting out," he says. "That's what they're concerned about in Rome."



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Reuters

Cardinals enter the Sistine Chapel to begin the conclave to elect a successor to Pope Benedict March 12, 2013.

And it isn't just corporations clamping down on rogue tweets and text messages; the public sector is getting involved too. Last December, the city council in Carson, Calif., passed a resolution to ban all cellphone use during public meetings, except in the case of urgent family matters. In this case, the council cited transparency, etiquette and the need to avoid the appearance of any impropriety. There was concern, for instance, that council members could use text messages or email to develop a "collective concurrence" about an issue on the council's agenda prior to voting. Using electronic devices could "create an

appearance that elected officials are either not paying attention or are engaged in communications to which the public isn't privy," the resolution stated. Las Cruces City Council in New Mexico imposed a similar ban in council meetings in 2010. The White House also asks cabinet members to leave their cellphones (labeled with a yellow sticky note) in a basket when meeting President Obama. See video: Inside the White House: The cabinet. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/inside-white-house-cabinet>

The policy changes come in the wake of some recent high-profile social media stumbles. In January, staff at the U.K. entertainment retailer HMV "live blogged" from a meeting where staff from several stores were being fired. Tweets included: "We're tweeting live from HR where we're all being fired! Exciting!!" and "Just overheard our Marketing Director (he's staying, folks) ask, 'How do I shut down Twitter?'" The staff's tweets were later removed, but many were re-tweeted and copied. (HMV didn't respond to requests for comment.) And it isn't just middle management getting in hot water: After Netflix CEO Reed Hastings wrote on Facebook in December that the video streaming service exceeded 1 billion hours of viewing, the Securities and Exchange Commission said the information was "material" to investors and should have been sent via press release or regulatory filing. (Hastings has disagreed, saying Facebook is a public forum.)

The bottom line, says Steve Langerud, a workplace consultant and director of professional opportunities at DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., is that the word in the board room at many companies is now, "If you're going to be present for meetings, leave your phone in your office." Obviously, going cold turkey on Facebook and Twitter — even during important staff or board meetings — isn't easy for some. Employees rely on their phones much like a virtual security blanket, Langerud says, as well as using tablets and smartphones for work. But in the absence of stricter rules, Handal says, people will continue to quietly click away on their BlackBerrys and smartphones during meetings, even if it seems rude: "It all depends on the focus, priority and topic." ■

<http://www.marketwatch.com/story/ceos-join-papal-conclave-in-no-phone-zone-2013-03-13>