



## The Corporation of the Town of Essex

Section:	<b>Corporate – Council</b>
Subject:	<b>Telephone Use Policy</b>
Policy Number:	<b>008</b>
Approval Date:	<b>March 15, 2010</b>
Approved By:	<b>R10-03-058</b>
Prepared By:	<b>D. E. Hunter</b>

### Objective

The telephone system owned by the Town of Essex is available for the purpose of conducting municipal business. Municipal employees, residents and business associates rely on the Town’s telephone systems to conduct daily business and to better serve the public.

The purpose of this policy is to define appropriate standards and procedures when using the Town’s telephone system, to govern its usage and to reduce the Town’s exposure to waste and abuse such as unauthorized long distance calls and excessive personal calls made by employees. This policy is also intended to manage communications costs, and help minimize corporate liability.

### Responsibilities

This policy applies to all Town of Essex employees, including but not limited to fulltime equivalents, part-time equivalents, council members, contractors and freelance workers who use the corporate telephone system for the purpose of conducting Town of Essex business and operations. The Town of Essex reserves the right to revoke telephone privileges at any time should it be deemed necessary to do so.

This policy covers all technological aspects of the Town’s telephone system, including handsets, telephone cabling, the voice mail system and applicable software and facsimile lines and equipment.

Employees are responsible for ensuring that handsets assigned to them are used within the parameters of this policy and protected from damage or unauthorized usage. Employees shall report any unauthorized usage or damaged handsets immediately to his/her manager or the IT Department.

Managers are responsible for educating employees in the appropriate usage of telephone systems and for ensuring that all aspects of the Telephone Use Policy are followed. Generally, managers are responsible for—

- monitoring employees' personal use of the corporate telephone system
- ensuring employee compliance with the policy;
- reviewing telephone bills, as required, for irregular calls or unusual usage;
- collecting reimbursements from employees for personal calls;
- distributing reimbursements to employees for business calls made on personally owned equipment; and,
- reviewing and evaluating requests for telephone services and equipment in conjunction with the IT Department.

The Town of Essex IT department has responsibility for the acquisition and maintenance the Town's telephone system, including the voicemail system, cabling, handsets and any other components of the system.

## **Personal Telephone Calls**

Town owned or operated telephone systems should be used only to conduct official business. Employees shall limit personal telephone calls, in frequency and duration, to only those calls that are absolutely necessary. This policy includes incoming as well as outgoing telephone calls.

Certain personal telephone calls may be allowed by the Town including—

1. Telephone calls to notify or contact family members and/or physician in the case of an emergency;
2. Telephone calls to notify family members of a scheduling change or travel delay that is a result of Town business including calls to make alternate child care or transportation arrangements;
3. Brief telephone calls to an employee's residence or family members, and
4. Brief telephone calls to local businesses (including government agencies, physicians, auto or home repair) that can only be reached during working hours.

Personal telephone calls, if necessary, shall be only be made during an employee's break period and shall not interfere with an employee's duties or with the duties of other employees and shall not impact an employee's productivity. Calls for the purpose of conducting business related to outside employment or business ownership are prohibited. Personal calls shall not be permitted

during regular working hours unless the call is an emergency or pre-approved by an employee's supervisor.

Personal calls should always be kept to a minimum and only be made on Town-owned telephones if they could not be reasonably made on another telephone such as a personal cell phone or a pay telephone.

## **Long Distance Telephone Calls**

Long distance telephone calls using Town-owned telephones or telephone credit cards issued by the Town should only be made for official Town business. When making long-distance telephone calls, employees are encouraged to use a toll free number (for example, 1-800, 1-877, 1-888) if available. Where long distance calls are necessary, the duration of the call should be kept to a minimum in order to reduce costs.

Long distance calls should not be made for personal reasons unless they are made for an appropriate reason as outlined in 3.0 Personal Telephone Calls above, are preapproved by a supervisor, and the employee:

1. charges the call to a third number (such as the employee's home phone number); or
2. makes the call collect; or
3. charges the call to a personal prepaid calling card or to a personal credit or debit card; or
4. Places the call to a toll free (800, 877, 888) number.

Only under limited circumstances shall long distance calls be allowed without employee pre-payment. In the event that a pre-approved personal long distance call is necessary, the employee will be required to reimburse the Town for the full cost of the long distance telephone call.

## **Procedures for Answering Telephone Calls**

Employees shall answer all incoming calls with a greeting that, at a minimum, includes the following—

1. An appropriate salutation such as "Good Morning", "Good Afternoon", "Hello"
2. The name of the employee answering the telephone call
3. An invitation to the caller to speak such as "How may I help you", "How may I be of assistance", etc.

Wherever possible, calls should be answered within three rings.

## Inappropriate Telephone Conversations

Telephone conversations using the corporate telephone system shall be conducted in a professional and businesslike manner. Foul language or discriminatory remarks which are contrary to the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, R.S.O. 1990 while using the corporate telephone system will not be tolerated.

## Verbally Abusive Telephone Calls

As an employee in the public sector where contact with the public is frequent, it is not unusual to receive a verbally abusive telephone call on occasion, which can be quite disturbing to the person answering the call. Abusive telephone calls can involve insults to the person answering the call or foul language. The Town does not expect employees to continue a call in this instance. The following guidance is provided in the event of a verbally abusive telephone call—

1. Try to calm the person in the initial stages of the phone call. Do not respond to the caller's anger.
2. If the person does not calm down and continues to be verbally abusive, warn the person that you will hang up if they continue to be verbally abusive using a phrase such as, "If you continue to use foul language, I am going to hang up."
3. If the warning does not have any effect and the caller continues to be abusive or use foul language, employees are encouraged to hang up on the caller. The person may call back. If they do, ask them if they are prepared to be calm. If they say they are, remind them again that you will hang up if they repeat the foul language or abuse and then continue your discussion.
4. The caller may ask to speak to your Supervisor. In this case you will transfer the call, but you should provide a brief explanation to your Supervisor of what transpired before connecting the call.

## Telephone Calls from Irate Customers

From time to time employees may receive a telephone from an irate customer. The following guidance is provided on how to deal with these types of calls—

- **Actively listen.** Let the irate customer talk through their problems and get it all out of their system. As they talk make indications that you are listening such as "uh huh", "really?" etc. This step is important because the more time a customer spends airing their grievances, the more time they have to calm down.
- **Allow the client to express their opinions.** Allow them to communicate their feelings however they choose to do so without passing judgment. Step in only if the client becomes directly abusive towards you (refer to Section 7.0 – Verbally Abusive Telephone Calls).
- **Maintain your personal integrity at all times.** If the customer is abusive, calmly interject something to the effect of "I appreciate your frustration with the situation however attacking me will not improve or resolve the situation - I would like to help you."

- **Be sympathetic.** Make sure the customer knows that you understand their frustration and acknowledge any mistakes that have been made, but only if the mistakes have been confirmed especially in cases involving other employees.
- **Be empathetic.** When appropriate, show empathy. Empathy implies that you feel the same way as the customer and truly understand their feelings. However, use phrases such as "I understand your anger" with caution as the customer may respond back with "You have no idea!" and more anger.
- **Ask questions.** After they complete their story, ask about the facts and details of the matter at hand and take notes of the facts and details.
- **Move into solution-mode.** Know when to ask open-ended questions, and when to stick with "yes" or "no" questions.
- **Apologize when appropriate.** Exercise caution with apologies as they can often be interpreted as an admittance of guilt. There are three types of apologies that can be employed in these situations, choose the most appropriate—
  - **Direct:** "I apologize that we ..."
  - **Blameless:** "I apologize for the fact you are frustrated - let's see if we can turn this around."
  - **Implied:** "It sounds like we owe you an apology." Many customers interpret this to be an apology when in fact none is ever given.
- **Offer to try to fix the problem.** Never promise to outright fix the issue, but always promise to try. If you make an attempt and fail, it will create further issues if you promised total resolution.
- **Gain agreement on your resolution.** Make sure the customer understands what has been done at the end of the call. Even if the issue is not totally resolved, gain agreement on the resolution that was reached.
  - **Example 1 (total resolution):** "So just to confirm, I have ..."
  - **Example 2 (pending resolution):** "So just to confirm, we have decided that *(whatever the action plan is)* - correct?"
- **Write a clear, concise log of the incident.** Document every major point of the call. It is not important to note every single word uttered, but keep a point-form log of anything that may assist others who deal with the customer in the future.

## Corporate Voicemail System

The corporate voicemail system provides a mechanism for recording messages when incoming calls cannot be answered.

Employees are responsible for establishing appropriate greetings for their telephone extension and for retrieving voicemail messages on a regular basis during regular business hours. At a minimum the greeting to persons wishing to leave a message should identify the employee by name and the timing for a call back period (two hours). When an employee is in the office during regular business hours, they are expected to return voicemail messages within a minimum of two hours whenever possible.

In the event of a planned absence from the office, employees shall record a greeting on the voicemail system that advises the caller of their absence and their anticipated return date.

## **Transferring Incoming Calls**

Where an incoming call is made to the wrong extension the call may be transferred. Prior to transferring the call, the employee should advise the caller of the reason for transferring their call, who they are transferring the call to, including that person's name and title and the telephone extension of the person they are being transferred to in the event that the transfer is not successful. Incoming calls should only be transferred if it is apparent that the employee called is not able to answer the questions or provide the information requested by the caller.

## **Facsimiles**

Facsimile lines and equipment owned by the Town of Essex are to be used to send and receive business-related facsimiles only. Use of facsimile lines and equipment for personal use is strictly prohibited.

## **Acknowledgement**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, acknowledge that I have read and understand the Telephone Use Policy of the Town of Essex. I agree to adhere to this policy and will ensure that employees working under my direction adhere to this Policy. I understand that if I violate the rules set forth in this Policy, I may face punitive or corrective action, including suspension of Telephone privileges, and up to and including termination of employment.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_