Office Tea Round Rules: The Unwritten Code

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Office tea round rules, in summary:** The office tea round is a set of unwritten British workplace rules: you ask you make, you remember each persons brew, you carry by handle, you keep the rotation fair.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in April 2026.

The British office tea round has unwritten rules, rotation is fair, preferences must be remembered, milk and sugar order matters, returning empty mugs is courteous. The good tea round maker is socially valued; the bad one is quietly resented. Tea round social capital is real workplace currency.

What is the tea round

The office tea round is the British workplace tradition where one person makes tea for an entire team or office. Common in:

- Construction sites.
- Office kitchens.
- Factories and workshops.
- Hospital staff rooms.
- Police stations.
- Small businesses.
- Domestic settings (extended family).

Each "round" serves 4-8 cups simultaneously.

The unwritten rules

Rule 1: Rotation

The tea round chore should rotate fairly. Methods:

- Whoever is in the kitchen first.
- Volunteer rotation.

- Designated "tea round" position rotated daily/weekly.
- The tea round buddy system (pair up; alternate).

The team member who never makes tea is socially marked. The team member who always makes tea is generous (or being taken advantage of).

Rule 2: Remember preferences

Every team member has tea preferences:

- Milk: yes/no? Splash/generous?
- Sugar: 0/1/2/3 spoons?
- Strength: light/medium/strong/builders'?
- Tea type: standard/Earl Grey/decaf/herbal?
- Mug: own personal mug?

The good tea round maker remembers everyone's preferences without asking. Asking each time is acceptable but suggests effort rather than mastery.

Rule 3: Use the right mug

Most British office workers have personal mugs. Using the right mug for the right person is a basic courtesy. Mistakes are forgiven; consistent right mug use is appreciated.

Rule 4: Brew strength matters

The tea round maker should:

- Use one bag per cup (no double bagging unless requested).
- Steep 3-5 minutes.
- Squeeze the bag for full strength.
- Adjust strength to individual preferences.

Rule 5: Milk and sugar order

Add milk first, then sugar (or sugar first, then milk, tradition varies). Mix thoroughly. Don't over stir (creates tannin from bag squeezing).

Rule 6: Carry without spilling

Carrying multiple mugs requires technique:

- Tray for 5+ mugs.
- Two handed carry for 4 mugs (two per hand).
- Slow walk, no sharp turns.
- Don't fill mugs above 80% if carrying multiple.

Spilling tea is a workplace embarrassment.

Rule 7: Return empty mugs

Reciprocal courtesy. The tea round maker brought you tea; you return the empty mug. Don't leave mugs around the office.

Rule 8: Wash up

Some workplaces require the tea round maker to wash all mugs at the end of the day. Others have a "wash your own mug" culture. Negotiate locally.

Rule 9: Don't whinge

The tea round is real effort. Some grumbling is fine; consistent complaining suggests you should opt out of receiving tea from the round.

Rule 10: Free loading is noticed

The team member who consistently receives tea but never makes it is socially marked. Even if you don't make tea, contribute equivalent value (snacks, biscuits, coffee).

The tea round skill set

A good tea round maker can:

- Brew 6-8 cups simultaneously without weakening any.
- Remember 6+ different preferences.
- Carry 4+ mugs without spilling.
- Make consistent tea quality.
- Time the round to be social (mid morning or mid afternoon, not at busy moments).

The tea round as social currency

Workplace tea rounds build social capital:

- Generosity: making tea even when not your turn.
- Reliability: consistently good tea round skills.
- Memory: remembering everyone's preferences.
- Initiative: starting the tea round when team is flagging.
- Conversation: making tea while chatting builds rapport.

People who excel at the tea round are quietly valued.

Tea round equipment

The kettle

Office kettle should be:

- 1.7-2L capacity (handles tea round of 6-8 cups).

- Fast boiling (1500W+).
- Variable temperature (rare in office settings; useful for green tea).

The supply

- 240-bag pack of mass market tea bags (lasts a small office 1-2 weeks).
- Some workplaces provide; most expect each person to contribute.
- Sugar bowl, milk in fridge.
- Personal mugs.

The tray

For 6+ mugs, a tray is essential. Workplace tea trays are often shared.

Variations by workplace type

Construction site

Strong builders' tea, milk and sugar, in mugs, often paired with biscuits. Very traditional rotation.

Office (corporate)

Variety of preferences (Earl Grey, decaf, herbal). Rotation looser. Often each person makes their own tea.

Hospital

Strong tea round during shifts. Tea breaks are brief but valued.

Small business

Tight knit teams. The tea round is the social glue.

Tech / startup

Sometimes coffee dominant; tea round less common. But premium tea is often available.

Modern challenges

Remote and hybrid work

The tea round depends on physical co location. Remote work has reduced the cultural prominence of the tea round in many workplaces.

Variety of preferences

Modern teams have diverse drink preferences (coffee, herbal, cold drinks, dietary restrictions). The tea round is harder to manage with 8 different preferences.

Free rider problem

Some workplaces have informal "tea round" cultures that no one actually makes, everyone makes their own. Reduces social bonding.

The tea round during difficult moments

The tea round becomes more important during:

- Office crisis or stressful periods.
- Long shifts (hospital, construction).
- Difficult news within the team.
- Team building moments.
- Pre meeting moments.

The cup of tea + the act of making it holds people together when it counts.

FAQ

How often should I make the tea round? Rotate fairly within your team. If 4 people, every 4 rounds.

How many cups? 4-8 typical for one round.

How long does it take? 8-12 minutes for a full round (boiling, brewing, distributing).

What if I don't drink tea? Still take your turn making it. Or contribute equivalently (coffee, snacks).

Mug ownership? Most British office workers have personal mugs. Respect this.

Curator's note: the office tea round is a British workplace tradition with real social weight. Good tea round = workplace social capital. Worth taking seriously rather than treating as a chore. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

The unwritten office tea-round rules at a glance

Rule	The note
You ask, you make	If you start the round, you brew the whole round
Know each persons brew	Strength, milk, sugar, decaf, herbal: memorise them
Carry the mugs by handle	Never grip rims; a single finger through each handle
Hot mugs to seated colleague first	Walking around with hot drinks loses cups
Round rotation	It comes back to you; the team keeps track
Use everyones own mug	Mug attachment is real; do not casually swap
"Yes please" when offered	Refusing once is fine; refusing repeatedly reads odd
Tidy as you go	Wash teaspoons immediately, not pile in sink

More tea reading

Continue with office tea, the British daily tea ritual and British tea culture.

Where this fits in the wider range: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Find more in the tea shop; UK delivery is free over £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · For the office kitty, work out the price per cup. Loose leaf usually wins, though office packs of bags sometimes do too.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

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