Workspace personalization: Clutter or meaningful personal displays?

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If you are like 70 percent to 90 percent of the American workforce, you personalize your workspace. Personalization is the deliberate decoration or modification of an environment by its occupants to reflect their identities.

Interestingly, some people personalize their workspaces more than others. Generally, women personalize more than men do and are more likely than men to display plants, trinkets and symbols of their personal relationships with friends and pets. Men, however, are more likely to display objects pertaining to sports and their personal achievements, such as certificates and awards. High-personalizing employees tend to be older, married and in high-status jobs with the nicest workspaces. People who personalize a lot also tend to be extraverted and open to new experiences. But again, most people personalize their space to some degree.

Why does such a large portion of the workforce personalize? Research indicates that personalization serves a wide array of purposes for employees. At the most basic level, personalization is a form of territoriality by which you are marking your space, subtly indicating, “This workspace is mine.” For new employees, marking your workspace with personal belongings fosters an emotional connection or a bond to the new environment.

Many employees report that their personal displays help them cope with stress by relaxing or inspiring them. Being surrounded by one’s own items provides comfort and a sense of “home.”

It also helps employees express their individuality. Research by Steelcase finds that one of the most desirable qualities of an office is that it reflects the personality of the person working there. Most office workers want to feel like an individual rather than a “cog in a machine” and claim that personalization allows them to convey their own unique personalities. It reminds them of their lives outside the office and that they aren’t just an employee.

Personalization also facilitates co-worker interaction. Decorating your workspace with personal objects provides others with personal information about yourself, which sets the stage for friendly communication. A colleague may walk by your workspace and see a picture of your ski trip and discover that you both have a love of skiing, which forms a connection between you. Furthermore, personalization expresses a commitment to a place and its purpose.

And finally, personalization simply makes places more pleasing to inhabit. People who live and work in monotonous, low-stimulus environments often personalize to bring novelty, humor or whimsy to the environment.
Despite the many purposes of workspace personalization, some facilities managers restrict it. In the past, some architects specified in their contracts that the building could not be altered or changed without their written permission. This included prohibitions against changing the drapes, installing partitions and even placing flowers on a desk. Even today, some facilities managers are hesitant to allow office workers to personalize their workspaces, especially in new or in open-plan offices in which the entire office can be viewed in one glance. Also, there is a long-standing assumption, though never empirically proven, that an orderly appearing environment promotes efficiency. Therefore, some offices have adopted policies that restrict the location or the extent to which employees may personalize, as well as the types of items employees may display.

Having conducted several published research studies on personalization, I have witnessed numerous policies on the topic that run the gamut. In one project, I studied a company that limited personalization to only one item per employee — a photograph of the employee’s choosing that had to be framed and placed in a particular location on the employee’s desk. Another firm allowed employees to personalize each day, but their personal items had to be stored in their desks every night. Think of the time and productivity lost each and every day due to the putting up and taking down of personal items.

However, studies have indicated that even when companies have clear policies restricting personalization, employees do it anyway. One research participant told me in no uncertain terms that if her company restricted the extent or manner in which she personalized, she wouldn’t work for them. These findings suggest a strong, psychological need for people to personalize their workspaces.

More importantly, scientific research suggests that personalization is good for business. Not only is personalization beneficial for employees, it is also beneficial for organizations. Companies that allow employees to personalize as they like have higher levels of employee morale, better social climates and reduced turnover — benefits that impact the bottom line.

So encourage your employees to personalize their workspaces and reap the benefits in your organization.

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