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Decorations walk a fine line

Most cubicle dwellers sense that displaying too much offbeat stuff might reflect poorly on their professional images. They're right, experts say.

By Joanne Cleaver
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Just to the left of Tom Stat's computer monitor is a pyramid of 12 round, Easter-egg colored, oval cardboard boxes.

Why?

Just because. He's associate director for the Chicago office of design firm IDEO and he thinks they're neat, and anything that stirs his creative juices is something he wants in his work space.

"You can't think outside the box if you are working inside a box," said Stat.

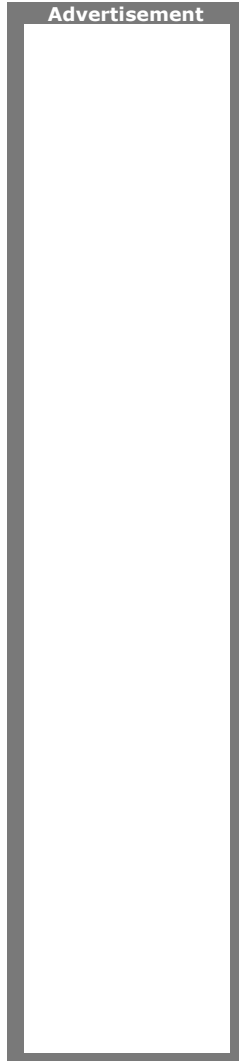
The work areas of IDEO's designers are predictably cluttered with Simpsons' character figurines, pictures of previous projects, the occasional leftover Christmas decoration and piles of other stuff ... an ever-changing collage of the unusual, the inspiring and the idiosyncratic. After all, designers are supposed to have funky stuff at their workstations. It's part of their image.

It's not the image that most people want to project, even if they were allowed to get away with over-the-top decoration of their personal work spaces. The majority of American office dwellers sense that offbeat stuff, especially too much of it, might reflect poorly on their professional images.

They're right, says Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, assistant professor of organizational behavior at the University of Michigan business school.

Research he conducted last spring has put a number on the previously unquantified "how much is too much" formula. That

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number is 22 percent. If more than 22 percent of the items in your office are personal in nature, you have crossed the invisible line into unprofessionalism.

Sanchez-Burks discovered this while researching the notion of "professionalism."

"Every society has a notion of 'professional.' In the U.S., we are finding that it means putting aside personal and emotional concerns. We wanted to get cold, hard evidence of this. So we wanted to see the amount of symbolic content in an office that comes from outside the workplace. Things like family photos and kid art," he said.

In his unpublished study, he gave 70 middle managers a drawing of a completely plain workstation and dozens of stickers of every conceivable item that people might jam into their spaces: work-related paraphernalia, including staplers and files; neutral decorations such as plants; and intensely intimate items such as vacation souvenirs, stuffed animals and any manner of child-produced art and craft.

The managers were given descriptions of various workers that termed them professional or unprofessional, then asked to assemble the look of the office that they would expect that person to have, using the blank template and the stickers.

"It was a methodology to capture the mental model of what it means to be professional. Visually, how do people perceive it?" explained Sanchez-Burks. "When they thought that the person was unprofessional, they associated that with much more personal stuff. It wasn't one particular item that did it. It was the amount of content. But all the personal items represented a life outside the office."

Sanchez-Burks and his assistants counted the proportion of personal items to overall items and found that 22 percent is the tipping point.

Although he is still "unpacking the data" to understand the nuances of that 22 percent, the practical implications are obvious, said Sanchez-Burks. "It helps you understand the cues that others are using to evaluate you."

That's especially useful for employees from other cultures, where a great deal of personal decoration in the work space doesn't reflect on a person's professional credibility, and for managers who oversee employees whose native cultures don't put a stigma on personal tchotchkes.

Meanwhile, organizational experts--the kind that deal with stuff, not students--are aghast.

"Wow. Twenty-two percent. That's surprisingly high. I would have guessed it to be more like 10 percent," said Barbara Hemphill, chief executive of the Hemphill Productivity Institute, a Raleigh, N.C.-based network of personal organizers. Hemphill is the author of the well-respected "Taming the Paper Tiger" system of office organization.

That personal office items can sabotage someone's professional status is hardly news to her. She is "all for" a bit of

personalization, as long as the items are judiciously chosen. "Whatever you choose, it will say something about you," she said. "You make sure you are comfortable with what it says about you. It's an extension of your image."

Collections of souvenirs, even if they are tangentially work-related, such as handouts from conventions, should be corralled in one spot so they don't look sloppy, she said.

Andrea Erwin, a consultant with Chicago-based organizing firm Chaos to Order, also reels at the thought of an office 22 percent occupied by personal paraphernalia.

"That could end up being 30 to 40 items," she says. "We've seen this. We have some [client] offices where you can't even get in the door for all the personal stuff."

Though a high proportion of personal items doesn't necessarily mean that the office is cluttered--all those Star Wars figurines could be lined up in battle formation, after all--the more stuff there is to work around, the more it all gets in the way of efficiency. And an environment that hampers efficiency signals "unprofessional," added Erwin.

But in most office cubicles, there's not much wiggle room for any stuff--personal or work-related. The Houston-based International Facility Management Association reports that clerical workers made do with 77 square feet of work space in 2002, and middle managers with 126 square feet.

With employees at every level enduring cramped quarters, each personal item sends a disproportionately loud signal about the person occupying that space.

The stakes are even higher for workers whose spaces are often visited by clients or customers, pointed out Jackie Tiani, president of Glendale Heights-based Organizing Systems Inc. "Your office should look like a place for concentration," she said.

Even IDEO, at the almost-everything-goes end of the spectrum, has intuitively segregated some of the more edgy forms of self-expression to areas frequented more by employees than clients, such as the lunch and lounge area.

"This is where the arguably political stuff is put," said Stat, standing by a white board that hangs over a food prep counter.

At the moment, it is covered with scribbled diagrams about the concept of things that come in 3s. "We don't have any rules here [about the amount of allowable personal stuff in an office]. Well, maybe one: You can't have rotting fruit."

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