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Too many office trinkets? Professional image may suffer

ANN ARBOR, Mich.—Family photos, kids' artwork and favorite knickknacks help personalize an office workspace, but too many personal touches may reflect poorly on a worker's professional image, say researchers at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business.

How much is too much? About 22 percent, they say. If more than one in five items that adorn a worker's office or cubicle are personal in nature, others may view that worker as unprofessional.

But this is largely an American phenomenon, they say.

"A general aversion for blurring the work/personal boundary in the context of work is more reflective of American business practices than of those found in many other industrialized societies," said Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, assistant professor of management and organizations at the Ross School of Business. "Americans are expected to put aside personal matters and focus almost exclusively on work-specific concerns upon entering the office."

Sanchez-Burks, U-M colleague Susan Ashford and Emily Heaphy of McGill University conducted two separate studies with working managers and corporate recruiters to see if impressions of professionalism are influenced by the degree to which an individual minimizes references to personal life while at work. They also examined whether this minimization is more characteristic of American managers than those from other countries.

In the first study, 95 managers were given descriptions of workers that described them as professional or unprofessional. The managers were then asked to construct the office of each worker by placing stickers of dozens of items typically found in workspaces onto color images of an office. These included items that are work-related (stapler, file folder, calculator, etc.), personal (family photos, posters of movie stars, sports equipment, etc.) and neutral (plant, clock, landscape painting, etc.).

The researchers found that the image of someone who is professional versus unprofessional reflects the proportion of objects that reference their personal, nonwork life—a pattern particularly strong the longer one has lived in the United States. Age and gender have no significant effect, although participants in the study expected women more than men to minimize the number of personal items overall.

"The results suggest that conceptualizing professionalism in terms of minimizing personal referents is a characteristic that comes with experience living in American culture rather than a culturally universal feature of what it means to be professional," said Ashford, professor of management and organizations and associate dean for leadership programming at the Ross School. "And to the extent that personal referents are more associated with women than men, it may be that people expect that females' gender identity is something to be attenuated at work."

In the second study, researchers asked corporate recruiters from several industries to evaluate materials from potential American and Brazilian job candidates. These materials included essays written by the candidates that described what they would say in a meeting with a client to build rapport. Some of the essays made a relatively minor reference to the client's nonwork life, such as complimenting the client's family photo on their desk.

They found that recruiters were more likely to evaluate American job candidates more favorably when they avoided making any references to the personal life of clients. However, evaluations of the Brazilian candidates were relatively unaffected by how often they mentioned personal topics.

"Minor personal references in the workplace—even as a way to build personal rapport—can have a negative influence on how one is evaluated by recruiters for American companies and success in the recruitment process," Sanchez-Burks said. "However, behaviors relevant to the 'minimization rule' appear to be informative about Americans, but not necessarily about people who are clearly from other cultures.

"Together, our findings contribute to work on impressions of professionalism and on a cultural psychology perspective of organizational behavior by revealing culturally bound criteria used to form an important and consequential impression of others. Our studies also provide further insight into how cultural differences in the criteria used to form positive and negative impressions of others can contribute to misunderstandings and potentially missed opportunities for organizations to recruit the best talent."

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