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Worry about workplace prejudice? Clean up

As a business owner, you have taken serious and tangible steps in your workplace in an effort to eliminate stereotyping and discrimination.



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You have implemented sound policies prohibiting unlawful discrimination, investigated claims of discrimination, and disciplined employees who have not followed your rules against workplace discrimination. However, you may be missing another simple and effective tool to reduce discrimination in your offices: cleaning them.

Recently, Dutch train-station cleaners went on strike. Predictably, garbage began to pile up at the stations. Researchers at Tilburg University in the Netherlands saw this circumstance as an opportunity to test their novel theory that cluttered environments promote stereotyping and discrimination. The idea is straightforward: as people face disordered and cluttered environments, they unconsciously seek structure and order in the chaos by resorting to the “comforts” of stereotypes. The university scholars, Diederik Stapel and Siegwart Lindenbergh, tested their theory by asking members of the public to fill out questionnaires at both messy and clean train stations.

However, the researchers calculated the responses by not only reviewing the answers provided on the questionnaires,

but by visually observing where the subjects sat to fill them out. Interestingly, in the clean train stations, the volunteers sat closer to a member of a different race/ethnicity than in the messy stations. In the messy environment, the volunteers sat further away from people who did not look like them.

The researchers took their initial findings and conducted further experiments in settings that more closely resemble workplaces. The total result of all of their experiments confirmed their initial finding: clutter and disorganization increase the prevalence of stereotyping. The study recommended that cleaning up and organizing public spaces could promote a more tolerant public environment.

What this science suggests is that messy workspaces may promote real or perceived stereotyping and discrimination in the workplace. This is not to say that maintaining a minimalist

office will rid your workplace of all hostility. Rather, this study may come in handy for you in a couple of ways.

First, you could consider using it to more forcefully request that a chronically messy employee clean up his or her own workspace. Second, if you are serious about ridding your workplace of unlawful discrimination, consider cleaning and organizing all of your common areas as a complement to all of your other hard work against workplace discrimination. ■

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