

What your desk says about you

By Bryna Singh and Lydia Vasko in Singapore /The Straits Times/ 02 March 2014
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Singapore (The Straits Times/ANN) - Lawyer Alfred Dodwell is fastidious not just about his desk, but also those of his employees.

In his rule-book, there are to be no photos, soft toys or any form of decoration on any desk in the office.

"Each employee in my small firm of 12 gets two computer monitors, so they can put reminder notes, pictures of their dogs and families on their desktops instead of on their desks," says the 46-year-old managing director of law firm Dodwell + CO.

At the end of each work day, he inspects all the desks.

"I am the discipline master and the HR manager," he says. "If anyone's desk does not meet the regulations, I will speak to them and they always comply."

He believes the policy is part of training his staff to embrace the office of the future - paperless, minimalist and tech-savvy.

"An untidy work space is a disaster waiting to happen. A neat desk creates a very focused working environment and enables people to work efficiently," he reasons.

At the other end of the spectrum is Oliver Atherton, a roto and paint site supervisor at Double Negative, a visual effects and computer animation company. He has a fish tank on his desk and takes his dog to work.

The 34-year-old says of his company's desk policy: "We like to treat people as adults and allow them to make up their own minds about what is and isn't suitable for their desk."

He adds: "Most of the desks have their own visual identity, which is quite nice. You can read a lot about someone's character from what he has around him."

The Straits Times' SundayLife! spoke to 12 companies on their guidelines for desk spaces, including banks, design and public relations firms and public institutions.

All except Dodwell's law firm say they believe in giving their employees creative freedom over their workspace and they do not impose rules on how they decorate their desks.

Belinda Choi, deputy corporate general manager at North East Community Development Council (CDC), says: "We want our staff to feel like they are among family and friends in the office, so we trust one another to do as they deemed fit in personalising our work spaces."

Maybank Singapore's spokesman adds that allowing employees to decorate their desks "ensures a comfortable and productive work environment for them".

These companies, however, share a general rule: Items put up must not be offensive or unhygienic.

For instance, Tupperware Singapore's spokesman says: "There should not be anything displayed that is obscene or invoke dissent of a political nature among others."

Where the companies differ is on the issue of eating at desks.

At North East CDC, staff are allowed to eat at their work spaces as long as they maintain cleanliness and the food item "does not carry a strong smell".

Public relations company Huntington Communications does not encourage staff to eat at their desks "due to the strong stench of certain cuisines", says a spokesman.

Staff are also advised to pack their food and snacks "neatly in air-tight containers" to avoid attracting or breeding pests.

While an employee's desk decoration reflects his personality, Paul Heng, 56, managing director of Next Career Consulting Group Asia, cautions that it may also influence others' assessment of him.

"Whether we like it or not, people will form perceptions about us based on our dressing, the way we talk and what we put on our desks," he says.

His advice?

"The key thing to consider is how you want people to perceive you and organise your desk accordingly.

"If you want people to see you as meticulous, clean and focused, your desk should reflect this."

ALICIA ALI, 27, senior account executive at AKA Asia, an integrated communications company

To look at Ali's desk, covered with playful knick-knacks, is to get a sense of her cheerful personality.

"I think a colourful desk helps to inspire my creativity and breaks up the monotony of meetings," she says.

The toys and knick-knacks are from her home or gifts from co-workers and friends.

When she is stressed, Ali plays with Darth Vader. The Star Wars fan, who is single, saw the 21cm-tall toy by Lego in a store window in Great World City early last year and fell in love with it. She bought it for about S\$40 and it now stands, light sabre in hand, on the top left corner of her desk. Her Lego calendar is a souvenir from a trip she took to Legoland in Johor last November.

"Lego is something I grew up with, so it is nostalgic for me," she says. "I play with the figures sometimes, move them to different places around my desk and every month, I have to re-jig the calendar, which can be annoying but quite fun."

Her notebooks and work papers, meanwhile, are categorised neatly in her in/out tray on the left side of her desk. She always keeps her company AKA notebook handy by her left hand, too.

"It has everything that I need for my meetings. It's my notebook for life. If I lose it, I'd die," she says.

PROFESSOR SUM YEE LOONG, 63, professor of accounting at Singapore Management University

Sum likes to keep his desk devoid of clutter. Research papers are stacked neatly on his right, so that when his students come to his office for consultations, there is room on the desk for their books and computer.

The clean desk contrasts with the shelf above it, which is full of antiques. Sum, who is single and has been collecting Asian sculptures for 30 years, estimates that he has amassed more than 3,000 pieces, most of which he keeps at home.

He spends more than half of his annual salary on his hobby and travels regularly to London and New York, where he says the best Chinese pieces are found.

He has more than 50 antiques in his office alone.

"When I'm tired, I look up from my computer and look at my pieces. It's very relaxing," he says.

He is not worried about theft. "We have security guards and you need an access card to get in."

The most costly item in his office is the white jade ruyi (literally meaning "as you wish"), a Chinese imperial ceremonial sceptre, for which he paid tens of thousands of dollars.

But his favourite is a porcelain laughing Buddha, which he bought here for about S\$4,000. "It has such a nice smile. When I look at it, I feel very happy," he says.

ETHAN ANG, 37, director at PR company The Right Spin

It is evident that Ang is a big fan of Madonna - vinyls, CDs and cassette tapes of the pop queen's albums are displayed all over his desk and the walls surrounding his work space.

"I like how she is constantly reinventing herself, challenging boundaries and changing her genre of music all the time," he says.

He is most proud of the vinyls propped up on his desk as he says several of them are limited editions.

The bachelor started collecting vinyls in 2012 after coming across them at a flea market in New York. A fan of music and all things vintage, he was drawn to the vinyl covers and how they represented music across different eras.

"I was also impressed by the pristine audio quality of the vinyls," he says.

Discovering that the vinyl covers would also make for nice wall art, he removed the vinyls and stuck their casings on the walls and placed them around his desk.

He encourages his colleagues to beautify their work spaces.

"Since we are in the creative industry, we should make the office more vibrant by expressing ourselves through our work spaces," he says.

LYDIA XIE, 28, a marketing manager at Maybank Singapore

More than 10 soft toys of varying sizes line the top shelf of Ms Xie's desk. Of these, two were given to her by her bosses.

She bought most of the others, such as Piglet, a Winnie The Pooh character. "I like to eat and when you think of an animal that loves to eat, you think of pigs," she explains.

What she treasures more, however, are the three service excellence certificates given to her by Spring Singapore in recognition of her good customer service, which she pinned up at her desk. She received these for three consecutive years from 2010 to 2012.

"These motivate me at work and remind me to keep up certain service standards," she says.

Another meaningful memento on her desk is a card given by her mother, which states what her Christian name means - "beloved of the people". "This means a lot to me as it reminds me of who I am," says Ms Xie, who is single.

Sometimes, she catches her colleagues smiling when they spot her soft toys.

"I'm glad my desk makes people happy. I want to feel at home at work. I don't want to be greeted by a cold, hard desk."

OLIVER ATHERTON, 34, roto and paint site supervisor at Double Negative (DNeg), a visual effects and computer animation company.

Atherton does not mind that the figurines which line his computer screen might make people take him less seriously. In fact, he prefers it that way.

"I want to be approachable. DNeg is very creative and we try to keep it as fun as possible and hopefully my work speaks for itself," he says.

Besides, most of the 20-odd figurines were gifts from colleagues - memorabilia from movies such as Captain America, Batman and Hell Boy that they worked on together.

The colourful figurines cheer him up and help to combat work stress. Another way is having a pet: A fish swims in a glass tank at the left edge of the desk.

"Every time I feel that I am getting a bit worked up, I would take a minute, look at the fish, which has beautiful colour and movement - its fins look like silk as it swims past - and then go back to work. It's very relaxing," says the Briton, who moved here with his wife in 2009.

Mindy, the office pug, is another de-stressor. Atherton and his wife adopted the 10-month-old puppy a few months ago and it goes to work with him about once a month.

"She loves people and she's very cute," he says. "But she's also a distraction."

KELVIS TEOW, 41, sales manager at home-grown distribution company Lion City Distributions

Teow wishes he has more space on his cluttered work desk, which is covered with papers.

Pinned up all around his cubicle are delivery schedules and promotion plans for the food and beverage products that his company distributes, while a tall stack of order invoices lies haphazardly on the left side of the desk.

Pointing to the stack, he says: "I succeed in clearing this every month, but a new heap arrives in its place."

He keeps the orders for a month each time, in case an issue, which can range from product shortage to a pricing problem, crops up.

When it gets too cramped, Mr Teow, who is not married, will put some of the paperwork under his desk, where the sheets jostle for space with boxes of product samples.

However, he always keeps his snacks within reach. "I eat them whenever I have a lot of work. It helps me to de-stress," he says.

"If not for all the paperwork that I've to follow up on, I don't think my desk will be messy. I'm not a messy person," he says.

SHERYL TAN, 24, senior associate in a public relations company

Polaroids, quotes and figurines of Minions and SpongeBob SquarePants dot Tan's desk.

SpongeBob SquarePants has been her favourite cartoon since secondary school and she finds the yellow Minions from the Despicable Me movies cute.

The quotable quotes on the left of her desk and pictures plastered on the right cheer her up when she is having a bad day. The Polaroids feature mainly her boyfriend and friends.

"I enjoy decorating my desk. It keeps me happy at work," she says.

"When I first joined the company about a year ago, I did not know what the limits were. I asked my boss, who told me the desk should reflect who I am."

With that, she went ahead.

There is also a poster of pop-punk singer Avril Lavigne - "the only singer I would go to a concert for" - pinned up on her desk.

"I like how she's non-mainstream and has a strong character."

She adds that a colleague was so inspired by her desk that she bought streamers for the office last Christmas and urged the staff to decorate their desks.

AZLIN MOHAMED, 40, corporate communications manager in North East Community Development Council

Azlin, who is single, calls her desk a "mobile supermarket".

There are loads of snacks stacked in a corner - biscuits, chips, flavoured tea sachets - and packet drinks on her table, in addition to her laptop, papers and files.

"I love it that everything is within reach and I'm happy to let my colleagues help themselves to my stash," says the self-confessed junk food lover.

The velcro tic-tac-toe board at her desk is also a draw. Once in a while, her colleagues gather around it to de-stress and have a quick round of the game, she says.

A bottle of purple nail polish is also within reach.

"As and when I feel like it or if I'm having a mental block, I paint my nails," she says.

People have remarked that her desk is messy, but it does not bother her.

"I can find my things. Besides, it's a mess that shows I'm busy, that I've various things to do," she says.

"I tried to pack up my desk last Christmas, but it was neat for only a week."

ALFRED DODWELL, 46, managing director of law firm Dodwell + CO

Dodwell is a self-professed neat freak.

"Every square inch of space at work should be used for work, not for teddy bears or other stuff. You can have your teddy bears at home and hug them all you want," he says.

Dodwell, who is married, walks the talk. His table is neat, with no sign of pictures, posters or any form of decoration. The only items are two computer screens, a mouse and a keyboard.

At times, there will be some writing materials on the desk or a legal document he is working on. But once he is done with them, they go back into the drawers or cabinets that they came from.

"In hotels and restaurants, everything is organised and has its place. I want to create that same 'wow' atmosphere in my law firm," he says.

His employees are expected to keep their desks tidy too.

Before he leaves the office for the day, he throws away any scrap of paper that he sees on their tables, helps to straighten out their telephone wires ("my pet peeve") and puts books back in the office library.

"Everything should be in its proper place," he says.

MICHELLE YONG, 21, graphic designer at Bravo Company design studio

Yong's workspace, just like her wardrobe, is meticulously monochrome.

According to her, this is because colours are used as statements in her work. "Colours make a statement and I use them for my work projects," she says.

But she herself does not want to make a statement. She prefers black and white which, she says, do not scream for attention.

"My clothes and accessories are always black or white," she says. "At home, my room is white. I have an Apple Mac book, a white table, white walls, white sheets."

Yong, who is unmarried, prefers things this way because she likes to "stay in the background".

Her clean, minimalist style is evident at her desk, where each item has its own place.

When not in use, Yong's water glass is on her right.

Her work materials, such as sketchbooks, Muji stationery and papers, are on her left.

Such organisation makes it easier for her to find her things when she is busy.

"Once I'm done using something, like paper specimens or Pantone colour charts, I put it back where it's meant to be," she says.

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