

## OFFICE DECOR

## Home away from home

**There are benefits to personalizing a workstation but, just like at home, there's a danger of going over the top**

STEPHANIE WHITTAKER  
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Joanna Bertin's workdays are filled with trauma and pain.

As a medical social worker at the Dr. Everett Chambers Hospital in Fredericton, Ms. Bertin does counselling and crisis intervention with families of patients who have serious injuries or critical illnesses.

So it's not surprising that, when she goes to her office, she's in search of some comforting respite. And to get it, she's filled her space with personal items: paintings, beeswax candles, a carpet, upholstered chairs, a hooked chair mat, a weekly bouquet of fresh flowers and a sweet pea vine in a window box that's climbing the blinds. She also lights her office with a desk lamp rather than the harsh overhead fluorescent lights.

"Hospital environments don't have a lot of soft edges," Ms. Bertin says. But "social workers are considered the warm fuzzies, so I think we can get away with being more personal."

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Ms. Bertin isn't the only person to create a workspace that smacks of being a home away from home. From family photos to artwork, knickknacks to other memorabilia, many people decorate their office or cubicle spaces with personalized items.

In Montreal, fashion industry recruiter and trainer Patty Shapiro has encouraged staff at her company to choose their own office furniture and wall colours, and to decorate any way they desired.

"Everyone's office is different," Ms. Shapiro says. "One person's office is purple. Another is pink. One is yellow

and one is red. My own office is red."

Creating such an atmosphere can offer many benefits over toiling in a sterile work environment, experts say. But there's a fine line to walk: One recent study, for instance, finds that a person who overdoes it can step dangerously close to appearing unprofessional.

Why do workers take pieces of home into the office?

"I think everyone wants to have a human face in the workplace, rather than feeling like just another cog in a wheel," says Lynda Goldman, a Montreal-based corporate image consultant.

"Things that have personal meaning - plants, artwork, photos - give us pleasure and can be a rest for the eyes when we are otherwise staring at a computer screen all day."

A personalized office also transmits the message that you have a life outside of work, adds Linda Constant, a professional development coach with Montreal-based Optimus Performance.

And how you choose to decorate your office space can say a lot about you.

Those family photos? They suggest you are a person with family values, Ms. Constant says. The sports trophies on display? They transmit the message that you're a team player. And the candy dish on your desk can be inviting to colleagues to come on in and feel at home in your space.

A highly personalized office can also be a sign of contentment at work, which can be a booster to someone's performance on the job, says productivity expert Ann Searles, president of the Canada-Caribbean office of the Institute for Business Technology.

"What I've come to realize is that when people make themselves at home by filling the office with stuffed bunnies, for instance, it shows they're happy being there.

"There's a loyalty factor. They're saying they want to stay right there."

But how far can you go in personalizing your office before you harm your credibility?

That depends entirely on the corporate culture of your organization, Ms. Constant says. "You should take your cue from the senior people in your organization. How personal are their offices?"

The tipping point, she and other experts say, is quantity and relevance.

"If you've got a bragging display of 8,000 trophies in your office and pictures of yourself with a bunch of celebrities, it may not have anything to do with your business," Ms. Searles says.

"On the other hand, if you manufacture aircraft engines and have a photograph of yourself with [test pilot] Chuck Yeager, that's pretty apropos."

If you see yourself scaling the career ladder, eschew anything cute, Ms. Constant adds.

"If you're a woman aspiring to rise through the ranks and you have kitten or flower motifs on your paper clip holder, don't expect to be taken seriously."

In fact, a recent study found that, the more personalized an office or cubicle is, the more its occupant may be viewed as unprofessional.

How personalized is too personalized? The tipping point comes when more than one in five items is personal, found the study, in which 100 MBA students were asked to design an office for two imaginary people - one described as "professional" and the other as "not very professional" - by affixing stickers that depicted objects found in offices.

In the office designed for the subject deemed "professional," less than 20 per cent of the items were of a personal nature; for the not very professional subject, more than 20 per cent of the contents were personal.

"An overly personalized office can adversely affect a person's reputation for professionalism," says Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, an assistant professor in the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, who conducted the study with Michigan colleague Susan Ashford and Emily Heaphy of McGill University in Montreal.

"Organizations reward employees who conform to the standard of separating work from their personal lives. People should pay attention to this when they begin working for a company," Prof. Sanchez-Burks adds.

Indeed, Cherine Zananiri, human resources director in the Montreal office of accounting firm RSM Richter, recalls an employee in a former workplace who "had hung a decorative wreath on the door and the office was done in a country style with scented candles. As manager, I had to tell the person to remove all those things. It was not businesslike."

But the funkier a corporate culture is, the higher the tolerance is for individual expression through office decor, Ms. Constant says.

When Ms. Shapiro moved her eponymous company into new quarters in Montreal's garment district two years ago, she filled her office with statues of shoes and purses, family photos and books about positive thinking. "It makes you feel good," she says. "There is no tipping point here. My people can't have too many homey touches. They perform better when they have a home away from home."

And the personalized decor doesn't go unnoticed, Ms. Shapiro says.

"Everyone who visits tells us they love the offices and wish they could work here."

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### **Decorating tips**

How to decorate your office without crossing the line? Here are some tips from the experts:

#### **TAKE A HINT**

The tone is set by those higher up in your organization. Check out how they've decorated their space and follow suit. Corporate culture counts. Some industries and companies, especially in more creative fields, will set more liberal boundaries. Factor in the culture of your organization.

#### **MAKE IT RELEVANT**

If you're going to display your academic credentials, awards and plaques on a wall, make sure they're connected to what you do at work.

#### **LESS IS MORE**

A couple of family photos may brand you as a dedicated family person; a wall covered in vacation snaps may give colleagues more insight into your private life than you might want. Likewise, a golf trophy or two on the bookshelves says you're a team player; a whole case says you're a showoff.

#### **USE DISCRETION**

Steer clear of items that are in bad taste, sexually, politically, ethnically or otherwise. On the other hand, pictures of kittens and puppies and cutesy dollar-store knickknacks risk making you look unprofessional.

#### **WAIT**

If you're new to your organization, withstand the urge to make yourself at home by decorating your office until you've had a chance to become familiar with the corporate culture.

*Stephanie Whittaker*

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher