

Creative chaos

Some people love to create an enormous mess on their desk – a very personal working habitat full of essential office paraphernalia such as stapled coffee beakers, stick-it notes full of cryptic scribbled messages, cartoons pinned on to the notice board and piles of paper. Especially lots and lots of paper... Facility managers hate this. They try to impose a clean desk policy, which obliges staff to leave their desk neat and tidy at the end of each working day. The cleaners then have less rubbish to shift around as they clean the desk, and that saves money. Management is generally in favour of a clean desk policy too. Worksites hidden under piles of mess do not fit into their ideal image of an efficient, streamlined organisation. Besides, then they don't have to worry so much about confidential files that somehow got misplaced. But reality is intractable. Despite – or perhaps even because of – the continued advances in the digitalisation of work processes people still have a tendency to surround themselves with clutter. Environmental psychologists speak of a deep-seated human need in this connection, which they call 'personalisation'. Some experts actually believe that neatness and tidiness are counterproductive. The American professor of management studies Eric

Abrahamson and the journalist David Freedman argue in their book 'A Perfect Mess' that order is often only apparent, citing the motto 'out of sight is out of mind'. They also claim that tidying up takes too much time.

Abrahamson and Freedman do take an extreme position, but they have a point. Spotless, paperless offices are fine for efficient bureaucracies that work with accurate, confidential or standardised data – banks, insurance offices or the Inland Revenue for example. Clean desks are less relevant in the creative sector. Think of the head offices of Google, for example. This is no clinical 'cubicle farm' but a cheerful idea factory where worksites are provided with the strangest office appurtenances varying from hockey sticks and pets to cartoons and plastic comic figures. The creative chaos at Google can be interpreted as a reflection of the lateral, associative thought processes of the employees. It is however also the resultant of a company policy that does not want to burden employees with rules, but wishes to leave room for a certain degree of anarchy. A clean desk policy does not form part of this philosophy. Those who do not believe in this approach may be referred to Albert Einstein. This chaotic genius once said: 'If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what then, is an empty desk?'



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