

Tidy Thoughts in a Messy Office

I'M WRITING THIS ENDPAPER ON NEW YEAR'S DAY, a time, for me at least, for personal reassessment resolutions for the upcoming year. Based on past experience, most of them are the same ones I made last year, including getting my body into better physical shape, reducing personal stress, staying caught up with professional reading, coming up with some value-added ideas, meeting my budgeted chargeable-hour goal, being a better husband and father, etc. However, I've added one this year—maintain a neater work space, both at work and at home.

You might ask why I think this is important enough to include here. I seem to have always had a cluttered work space, whether large or small, with a huge desk or a minuscule one. I've made use of the floor and anyplace else available to spread my paper piles. (Oh, when will I achieve a paperless office?) Although I've sometimes been accused of having perfectionist or even obsessive tendencies in some areas of my life, I guess I've never applied these traits to my office house-keeping.

This resolution was added to my list only after careful research regarding many actuaries' offices over the past year. My visits to company offices as a consultant have provided me with an objective view of the wide variety of practice in this area.

I estimate that about half the actuaries in the world have neat and tidy desks with a limited number of short piles on their worktops; in the extreme, restricted



to an "in" and "out" box. The other actuaries maintain a massive number of substantial piles or sets of leaning paper files on the credenza, as well as on the floor. Possibly half of the latter group tends to excuse the messy nature of their office when I enter, maybe trying to give the impression that it's a temporary situation. Clearly, I've been a member of the latter group.

It isn't simply the volume of work or range or level of responsibilities that leads to a cluttered desk or office, although a greater volume or range could serve as an excuse. In rare instances, the outcome might be influenced by the type of clerical assistance available, even though in these days of cost consciousness a personal or executive assistant is, more often than not, assisting others. Based on my observations, office neatness isn't necessarily correlated with success within an organization, either.

In conducting my research into this characteristic, I've arrived at several interesting conclusions that might be useful in studying other, possibly more significant problems.

● *Use of averages.* An average or expected value isn't always the best measure to be

relied upon. In fact, in some cases this measure can be quite misleading. The expected result of my study would be a "sort-of cluttered" office or a "sort-of neat" office. This characterization doesn't reveal much of use about the "average" actuary or in fact about much at all. In fact, there probably isn't an average actuary. Rather, a review of the distribution of outcomes or cluster analysis is often far more revealing.

● *The underlying issue.* Although it's easier and sometimes more fun to make excuses, such as "I know where everything is anyway," or "I'll clean up when I get some free time," it's more important to directly address any underlying problem. If there isn't such a problem, then it doesn't make a helluva lot of difference anyway. Maybe I just have too much to do or, rather, just like to complain about something! I'm sure I'm not alone; maybe it isn't so important after all.

● *People are different.* Although certainly not a revelation, it's clear that actuaries are just like everyone else, with a wide range of personalities and needs. One size never fits all. Different people approach a problem and life differently, and based on my research, they can be equally successful.

● *What matters is results.* Although interesting in and of itself, the effect on productivity (or in more material issues, the financial effect) is more important than the individual approach taken. There are those from both camps who are equally effective. In the case of the cluttered office, the only importance of being office-neat is the degree that it affects productivity or effectiveness (along with, of course, the possible curses of the cleaning staff).

I guess that as long my system works and other systems aren't demonstrably better, maybe I won't be able to carry out my resolution after all.

What type are you? ●

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