



[NATURAL ELEMENT]

Office Spaces

Does clutter seek its own level?

By Jay Dixit

“I F A CLUTTERED DESK signs a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?” wondered Einstein.

And though the famous chaos of his desk clearly didn't stand in his way, the prejudice against mess persists to this day. Most people admit they think less of someone who's messy, says David Freedman, coauthor of *A Perfect Mess*, and two-thirds believe they'd be more successful if they were neater and more organized.

But Einstein was right to challenge the conventional wisdom. Studies show that top executives are actually less organized than subordinates, and levels of office messiness actually increase with education, salary, and experience.

There are real personality differences between the messy and the neat. Clean, tidy rooms and offices are signs of highly

conscientious people—those who tend to be organized, methodical, and task-focused, says Sam Gosling, a psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Snoop*.

So what accounts for the difference between neat and messy? It may be that messy and neat desks are actually adaptations to differing cognitive styles.

People respond differently to cues in the environment—and neat and messy people may be calibrating their workspaces to suit the way they think, says David Kirsh, a cognitive scientist at the University of California at San Diego who studies the differences between neat and messy people. “People can be placed on a continuum,” says Kirsh. “There are benefits to be had for each type that seem matched to the way people organize their work activity.”

The state of our desks sets the arena for the next round of activity and provides entry points for the tasks of the day. Neat people, says Kirsh, often use “explicit coordinating structures”—to-do lists, day planners, and digital calendars—to help decide which tasks to focus on when.

Messy people depend on the cues in their environment to prompt their behavior, says Kirsh. Their stacks of documents,

folders, Post-it notes, and laid-open books remind them of what they've done and need to do. And the piles on their desks defy simple classification. “The categories that best describe the piles of files that build up over time on a messy desk,” writes Kirsh, “are not found in the Library of Congress subject catalog.”

CLUTTER wars

Snapshot of a Messy Mind

“The piles on messy desks are useful. You put your fingers on things quickly—often far faster than someone who files stuff. Plus, randomness is an essential part of creativity. Looking through those piles spurs connections, random thoughts that give you unexpected insights.”

—David Freedman, coauthor of *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder*

Snapshot of a Neat Freak

“If you have piles of stuff all around and can't find what you need when you need it, you can't be effective. A disorganized office creates stress and hinders productivity. You can't be fully present in your current work. It's hard to focus on one thing at a time. You keep switching back and forth between tasks. There's a huge time-cost to multitasking.”

—Julie Morgenstern, author of *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life*