Safety Tip of the Month

Workplace Clutter & Why Addressing It Matters

Ah, clutter…! The very word can send chills up the spine for some, while for others the nature of the word is innocuous. But, when left ungoverned, it can have unintended consequences to both your safety and mental well being. Therefore, this month Risk Management would like to discuss the requirements for workplace housekeeping, and some strategies to help you show that clutter who’s boss!

Clutter and Its Role in Safety Regulations
Source: www.ishn.com

Controlling clutter is the law. OSHA section 1910.22 (a)(1) is pretty clear. “All places of employment, passageways, storerooms, and service rooms shall be kept clean and orderly and in a sanitary condition.” You don’t want clutter to be the first thing OSHA compliance officers to see when they walk through our doors.

Aisles filled with material block access to critical equipment. It’s difficult to know that an electrical cord has been too worn down, or an item that supports office equipment has been compromised when you can’t see it due to clutter. People trip or slip over items left on the floor. Material blocks exits and safety equipment.

Clutter can be dangerous. When items are stacked high enough, they have the ability to fall onto or obstruct access to egress at a critical event, and if items are made of combustible material (e.g., paper), they can become a fire hazard.

Additionally, we cannot forget the “What does not fit on top of the desk, may fit under the desk” scenario that so many of us fall victim to. The problem is that the area under the desk soon becomes “The Land of the Lost”--once it’s under there, it is gone forever. And besides the obvious effect this has on comfort (ergonomically), under-the-desk storage creates a fire hazard, and limits your ability to get under your desk in the event of an earthquake. Moreover, electrical cords often are hidden under these masses of clutter that can subsequently heat up, causing shorts or even fires.

Clutter and Its Overall Effect in the Workplace
Source: ohsonline.com

Items and clutter can harbor dust and pathogens. Why? When large volumes of items are stored on, underneath, and in between work equipment, the ability to effectively clean surfaces becomes greatly diminished, allowing for dust and contaminants to accumulate. It also places an undo hardship on those cleaning these surfaces. It’s difficult to gain access to surfaces that are covered with items. Custodial service representatives often have to clean elevated surfaces, which requires a safe amount of focus on the task at hand. Such a chore becomes that much more difficult when they are attempting to navigate through boxes, files and other various items.

It’s common to find rooms or storage areas in businesses that are loaded with unused, unneeded, and nonfunctional items. People can at times be so focused on the work at hand that they keep unnecessary items rather than discarding them or placing them away for long-term storage. Such practice can adversely impact safety and health, and drag down quality and operational effectiveness.
WORKPLACE CLUTTER (continued)

Unintended Consequences of Clutter

When we enter the work environment, we normally can’t say that we aren’t provided the option to personalize our office or office space to a certain degree. Pictures of friends and family members; diplomas and awards; and desktop items (such as pen holders and file organizers) can often be apart of establishing our personalities at work.

Some people like to keep live plants in their space to give it that “homey” feeling; but when plants are overwatered, neglected or are in too great of an abundance, harmful secondary effects can ensue. The same can be said of books, magazines, catalogs, newspapers, trinkets, tokens, and signs that can contribute to the clutter effect, and create great areas of harborage for unwanted pests. However, some people have difficulty discarding anything, which creates a logistical nightmare: where to put all the items that they keep, creating seemingly unnecessary challenges and safety concerns for ourselves and others.

Physical Clutter Can Create Mental Clutter

Source: lifehacker.com

Over time, a person can collect things for a number of reasons—maybe they think they will need to use it later; it has sentimental value; or they spent good money on it so they feel they need to keep the item, even if they haven’t touched or used it in weeks, months, or years.

But the reality is that they probably made a mistake in acquiring those things, and it literally hurts the brain to come to terms with that fact. Researchers at Yale University recently identified that two areas in your brain that are associated with pain, the anterior cingulate cortex and insula, light up in response to letting go of items you own and feel a connection to.

This is the same area of the brain that lights up when you feel physical pain from a paper cut or drinking coffee that’s too hot. Your brain views the loss of one of your valued possessions the same way as something that causes you physical pain. And the more you’ve committed emotionally or financially to an item, the more you want to keep it around.

Whether it be your closet or office desk, excess things in your surroundings can have a negative impact on your ability to focus and process information. That’s exactly what neuroscientists at Princeton University found when they looked at people’s task performance in an organized versus disorganized environment. The results of the study showed that physical clutter in your surroundings competes for your attention, resulting in decreased performance and increased stress.

But Clutter Isn’t Just Physical...

Source: lifehacker.com

When you have “to-do” items constantly floating around in your head, or you hear a ping or vibrate every few minutes from your phone, your brain doesn’t get a chance to fully enter creative flow or process experiences. When your brain has too much on its plate, it splits its power up. The result? You can struggle at: filtering information; switching quickly between tasks; and keeping a strong working memory. The overconsumption of digital stuff has the same effect on your brain as physical clutter.

4 Ways to Master Clutter

Source: lifehacker.com

Set limits to what you keep. Set limits on how many apps you own, and how many books you buy. Completely use an item up before seeking its replacement. Remember: there will always be more materials available than you can consume, so setting limits can change the habit of just trying to get “through it all” into enjoying more of what you consume.

Use Small Storage Spaces to limit what you keep.

Conduct a monthly review of your space to see what truly needs to be kept, what can be discarded, what can be stored electronically, and what can be sent off for records storage long term. Ask yourself, “Is there an electronic version of this?” Begin to scan hard copy guidance documents, and discard instructional materials that have revisions.

Remove files from your desktop daily. If you don’t have an immediate place to move a file, create one folder on your desktop and drop stray files in there. Discuss long term and/or shared unit materials with your department to ensure staff know where shared materials are located.