

# Keep it professional at the office cube

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(Phys.org) —The company picnic: a time to relax and be yourself, right? And the office cube ought to be a space to personalize because you spend so much time there.

A strong, and unwritten, cultural norm against overt displays of one's [personal life](#) underlies the U.S. workplace, suggests new research by Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, associate professor of management and organizations at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. Those who violate this norm are seen as less professional and suffer

career consequences such as negative evaluations by hiring managers and colleagues.

But this norm doesn't hold outside the U.S., which can make it difficult for expatriates to navigate the office culture at a new job. In other countries, displays of personal life are fine at work, and the direct, formal, U.S.-style way of doing business may be seen as unprofessional.

"This information reveals a fundamental tension in so many workplaces," Sanchez-Burks said. "Everyone knows it's important to be perceived as professional, but that involves a lot of implicit, unspoken norms that might only be apparent when they're violated. We want to shine a light on what some of those are."

Sanchez-Burks and his co-authors, including Susan Ashford, professor of management and organizations, performed three studies to find out how people view professional behavior. They found differing attitudes based on country of origin.

The research paper is set for publication in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

In one study, the authors asked people in managerial positions to picture the office of a hypothetical co-worker with a reputation for being either professional or unprofessional. Participants, who were born in the U.S. and other countries, used stickers of common office objects to complete a picture of what the hypothetical person's office would look like.

The U.S. workers imagined a greater proportion of personal artifacts in the unprofessional colleague's office than in the one described as professional. While an outright ban on personal objects wasn't observed, the amount to be considered professional was minimal.

In addition, the longer the foreign-born participants had lived in the U.S., the greater the bias was about personal life references.

"This shows that how we think about professionalism isn't universal," Sanchez-Burks said. "The conventional wisdom is that U.S.-style capitalism is globalizing workplaces. But we're seeing that cultural differences remain in the work setting, particularly when it comes to how we view professionalism."

How high are the costs of being viewed as unprofessional in the U.S.? Two additional studies show they're pretty high.

In one, U.S. and Indian participants judged a pretend job candidate. Two different answers to one question about building rapport with a client were randomly assigned. In one version, the candidate said he would make small talk about family and children. In the other version, he said he would make small talk about the person's [office](#).

The U.S. participants negatively evaluated the candidate who said he would make small talk about family. The Indian [participants](#), by and large, did not.

Another study repeated the exercise with U.S. job recruiters. They negatively evaluated the candidates who said they would use nonwork small talk to build rapport with a potential client.

"This norm of keeping work and nonwork roles separate is strong, and you will be judged by it," Sanchez-Burks said. "People are significantly less likely to be asked for a second interview if they violate this norm in a very subtle way. It also shows how these norms perpetuate themselves. These are the gatekeepers of companies, the ones who make the hiring decisions."

So how can you educate someone on a cultural standard that's so common nobody thinks to mention it? A first step is to recognize the idea that professionalism isn't universal, Sanchez-Burks says.

Provided by University of Michigan

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