

Employee fraud decreases when they see family photos

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Displaying family photos in the workplace cuts down on employee fraud and other unethical behavior, new Washington University in St. Louis research finds.

For instance, in one study the researchers conducted, participants who looked at pictures of family or friends filed expense reports claiming about \$8 less on average than workers without pictures. While \$8 may not seem like much, it can add up quickly.

"If numerous employees submit monthly expense reports to a company, it's easy to imagine the financial impact of the reduction in unethical [behavior](#) over time," said Ashley Hardin, assistant professor of [organizational behavior](#) at Olin Business School.

Hardin is the lead author of "Show me the ... family: How photos of meaningful relationships reduce unethical behavior at work," in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

Photos at work

More than 70% of workers display photos in their workspace, and people have a great deal of choice in what they put up, Hardin said.

At the same time, companies have considerable influence over whether employees have photos in their workstations by signaling their acceptability.

Hardin and co-authors theorized that having photos of "close others" in view "decreases the hegemony of an economic schema in people's minds"—in other words, reduces the prioritization of self-interest, among other things, which decreases their propensity to misbehave. These hypotheses were supported across four studies they conducted.

Photos are a cue to the self and others because they convey information about values and interests, previous research found. Until now, however, the effect of personalizing one's workplace with photos on financial transgressions was unexplored.

The authors conducted a field survey and three experiments; they found a negative relationship between employees who display photos of family or friends at work—rather than photos of landscapes—and financial transgressions.

Practical implications

Given the frequency and cost of unethical behavior at work, "there is great interest in understanding what contributes to these behaviors and how to curb such conduct," the authors wrote. Hardin conducted the research with Christopher Bauman of the University of California, Irvine, and David Mayer of the University of Michigan.

Their results consistently indicate that the presence of photos of close others—family and friends—reduces the likelihood that individuals will over-report their earnings, pad expense reports or engage in other bad behavior.

"Our findings are relevant for individuals at work. For example, individuals who want to guard against their own unethical behavior could display photos of friends and family in their workspaces," Hardin said.

And companies should consider encouraging employees to display photos of [family](#) and friends.

"More broadly, companies and individuals alike should be mindful of how their physical surroundings may be influencing their behavior," the authors wrote.

"Whereas some organizations encourage segmentation of work and life by penalizing those who bring outside topics into work, our findings suggest that this segmentation may have an unexpected downside in terms of [unethical behavior](#).

"Our results suggest that subtle adjustments to the physical context can alter [employee](#) behavior, and it should, therefore, be possible to design organizational interventions that help to inhibit fraud and other forms of undesirable behavior."

More information: Ashley E. Hardin et al. Show me the ... family: How photos of meaningful relationships reduce unethical behavior at work, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.04.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.04.007)

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