

Jochen Mai

The Office Bible

Everything you need to know to do
a better job

368 Pages

Rights Sold: Korea

ISBN 978-3-423-24762-7

Jochen Mai: Die Büro-Alltags-Bibel / The Office Bible

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8.31 Firstly, plan your day!

The most commonly employed methods for time- and self-management ▪ To-Do-lists and their alternatives ▪ The problem of procrastination ▪ How to stop e-mail-terror ▪ **Some tips for office organization (p. 63-65)**

Order is one half of your life, a German saying goes. Where this myth actually stems from is difficult to say. Especially if you start thinking about the other - and possibly better - half of your life. It is, however, a matter of fact that at least the bosses like orderly offices. According to a study by British psychologist Cary Cooper, 70 percent of all managers appreciate employees with tidy desks. To their thinking, a clean desk comes with a structured and well organized mind. This is not so far from the truth. Piles of paper on your desk which are slowly mutating into wandering dunes, or hills of files from which only extensive excavations will free the lost lunch packs, can severely encumber your productivity. But when you start your day in a reasonably tidy office, it will be consequently easier to organize your entire day.

However, cleaning up has its own pitfalls. Someone with an affinity to messiness will hardly benefit from a slap-bang cleaning campaign. Such persons only create space for more disorder. The only way to establish a lasting order is to turn it into a habit and therefore to clean up everything right after working with it.



Consequently, experienced “cleaners” advise a fixed location for all the daily utensils: all the pencils in the pencilholder, stapler, hole puncher, sellotape, paperclip & Co. in their respective drawer; letters and notes in their designated filing trays and so on. Some professionals even sort their working material in special topic areas – for instance all the pencils, erasers and pencil sharpeners in one place, or the letter opener, stapler and the hole puncher in another. This saves search time. Another way is to organize everything into a hierarchy. Some things are needed more often than others, for instance calendar and pencils. These things can be placed at hand, while others can be put somewhere in the vicinity of your working place. Such an organization speeds up your work-flow. But only if you take the third advice to your heart as well: reduction. How many pens and pencils are lying in your drawer? And how many more on your desk? And which are the ones you are using on a regular basis? Oh, right. Pencils which no longer work can be chucked out. As for the rest, it is usually enough to have a pen, a pencil, a fineliner and some text markers. The rest can be taken back to the office assistant, into the storage room or thrown away. The art to keep order is to get rid of everything superfluous first – before you start organizing the rest.

But don't worry, this is not a plea for order-absolutism, the one some advertisements want to make you believe: work smart, work clean. Pedantry is bad for creativity. And piles of paper can sometimes be the mother of all kinds of innovative ideas. This thesis actually has a scientific base: a tidy desk may be good for the image – but too much order can also be obstructive, as noted by Professor Eric Abrahamson from Columbia University in New York. Excessive tidiness can even cause accidents, as was found out by Stephan Grünewald, a psychologist from Cologne. In a survey for the German Road Safety Board, he found out that those drivers which adhere particularly strictly to traffic rules are noticeably often involved in car crashes. The reason: pedants have no training in spontaneity. Some psychologists conclude that everybody works most effectively when he has found his individual level of chaos. Their advice is to create limited “oases” of confusion in your daily life, because such areas reduce the stress caused by order and give structure to the office inhabitants at the same time – even be it a highly individual one.

However, such chaotic areas should not become too big, or you risk the *Broken-Window-Effect*. Kees Keizer from the Netherlands verified this effect together with his colleagues from the University of Groningen. Simply put, it means this: if there is a house with a few broken windows in an otherwise normal street, it will not take long until the entire block is derelict. One of Keizer's most impressive experiments was to put a five-Euro-note into an envelope, the money still being visible from the outside. Just as openly, he put it into a letterbox. What followed varied greatly: if the letterbox was smeared with graffiti, the probability of the envelope being stolen rose to 27 percent, and if the letterbox was surrounded by garbage, the probability was still at 25 percent. This changed if the surrounding area was pristine: only 13 percent of the pedestrians got sticky fingers. The Dutch scientists concluded from their survey that antisocial behaviour reinforces itself: as soon as one person displays such behaviour without any consequences, the social behaviour of his neighbours deteriorates very soon after. This effect can also be seen in the office. You will certainly have noticed the Broken-Window-Effect in the tearoom. As soon as one of your colleagues puts his dirty teacup on top of the dishwasher instead of **in** the dishwasher, other cups will join – until the entire sink is filled to the brim with grubby cups, dirty plates and used cutlery. It works the same way on the desk, even though you are the only person responsible for its state. Two used cups, some unsorted press clippings, dog-eared notes and a half-eaten bread-roll are enough and within a few days your desk evolves into a piece of art worthy of Joseph Beuss notorious German artist famous for artwork containing perishable foodstuff]. Maybe a secret drawer for odds and ends would be the better solution?

(...)

11.110h lala!

Why we enjoy office flirts (p. 117-118) ▪ Office affairs are dangerous ▪ How to bewitch someone for good ▪ How to react to sexual harrassment

Let's face it: how often have you looked after a female or male colleague and then elaborated at length about his or her physical attributes? Welcome to the club: you are – in best sense of the word – common. Because lust and love in the office are rather the rule than the exception. As found out in a representative survey by online job exchange Jobscout24 in February 2009, 8.8 million of a total of 40 million employees in Germany admit to having had at least one affair in the job, which is about one fourth of all employees. Almost one half (45 percent) think that a flirt in the cafeteria or next to the fotocopier is absolutely acceptable. Nearly every second man admits of having had a crush on his female colleague, as was found out in a poll by the dating agency Elitepartner. 31 percent of those kept their feelings secret, though. Women are by no means disinclined to a little office flirt either. Even if 31 percent are adamantly against it, another 43 percent confess to having started an affair with a colleague. Compared with EU-wide numbers, this is not exceptional: in a survey by the online job exchange Monster, more than one third of European employees claimed to have had an office affair. Great Britain and Ireland turned out to be particularly hot-blooded: 41 percent of the interviewees conceded to having had sex with a colleague. The Spanish, surprisingly, emerged as rather adverse to flirts, with only 29% admitting to office affairs.

An office romance does have its advantages. Firstly, for the parties concerned: next to your circle of friends and during your vocational training, the work place is the third-most important meeting ground for prospective partners. About 35 percent of all marriages start here. And for a good reason, too: nobody buys a pig in a poke. Usually, the general interests and the level of education among the colleagues in one department match; and during lunch breaks you hear all kinds of private information and can check out and assess your potential partner more thoroughly. The in-depth selection seems to pay off: statistically, relationships starting in the office keep longer than others.

Additionally, various researchers in ergonomics and organisation point out all the time that flirting reduces stress and improves motivation abruptly. Sexual excitement causes the increased release of endorphins, whose euphoric effects can last up to 24 hours. And as if this were not enough, it is proven that employees in love are more dedicated and more willing to take over additional tasks – possibly also in order to spend more time near his or her beloved. It doesn't come as a surprise, then, that German bosses have no objections against relationships amongst the personnel. But this position might be a little premature.