

WORKPLACE WRITING PROMPT - #14

TOPIC: Professionalism in the Workplace

QUESTION: Write an informative essay describing how setting up a workplace area reflects an employee's professionalism.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Read the following text:
 - What Does Professionalism Look Like?
2. As you read the article, think about details from the article you might want to use in your essay. You may highlight key points and ideas.
3. After reading the article, create a plan for your essay. Think about ideas, facts, definitions, details, and other information or examples you want to use.
4. Write a 5 paragraph essay with an introduction, 3 body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Each paragraph should contain 3-6 sentences. Follow this outline:
 - **Introduction paragraph #1-** Introduce the topic clearly and provide a focus. Explain what the essay will be about. Turn the topic question into a statement.
 - **Paragraph #2 -** Describe what setting up a workplace is and give examples of it. Discuss how it is a reflection of an employee's professionalism.
 - **Paragraph #3 -** Discuss why a workplace setting is important. Give examples of situations at work that would influence the reaction of other workers, clients and supervisors to the way an employee has established his/her work area.
 - **Paragraph #4 –** Tell some of the things an employee can do to improve his/her professional image through his/her workplace set up.
 - **Conclusion paragraph #5 -** Provide a summary of the information just presented.
5. Be sure to use correct sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Use clear language and vocabulary. Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion. Be sure to use information and details from the texts.

What Does Professionalism Look Like?

by Gretchen Gavett

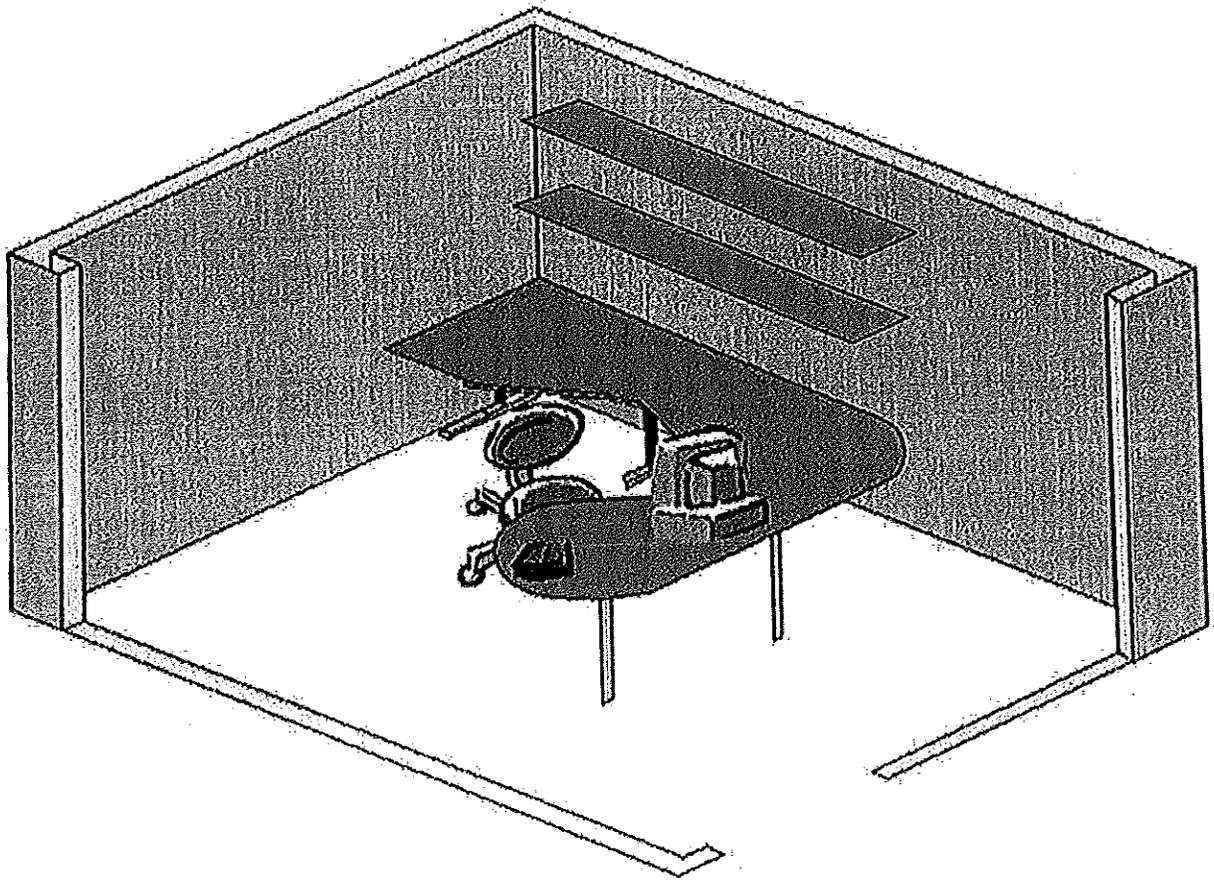
MARCH 20, 2014

When we talk about “professionalism,” it’s easy to fall back into the “I know it when I see it” argument.

For Emily Heaphy, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at Boston University, and her colleagues, this isn’t a cop-out. The notion of being *seen* as professional may be central to how we define success in the U.S. — and, consequently, how and why certain people aren’t able to attain it, depending on how well they adhere to social norms. In particular, Heaphy and the other researchers set out to study “one potential culturally bounded workplace norm — that of minimizing references to one’s life outside of work.”

They did this in two ways: First, they tested how people connect perceptions of professionalism to what a worker’s desk looked like. Second, they examined how recruiters from two different countries rated potential employees who referenced family or children.

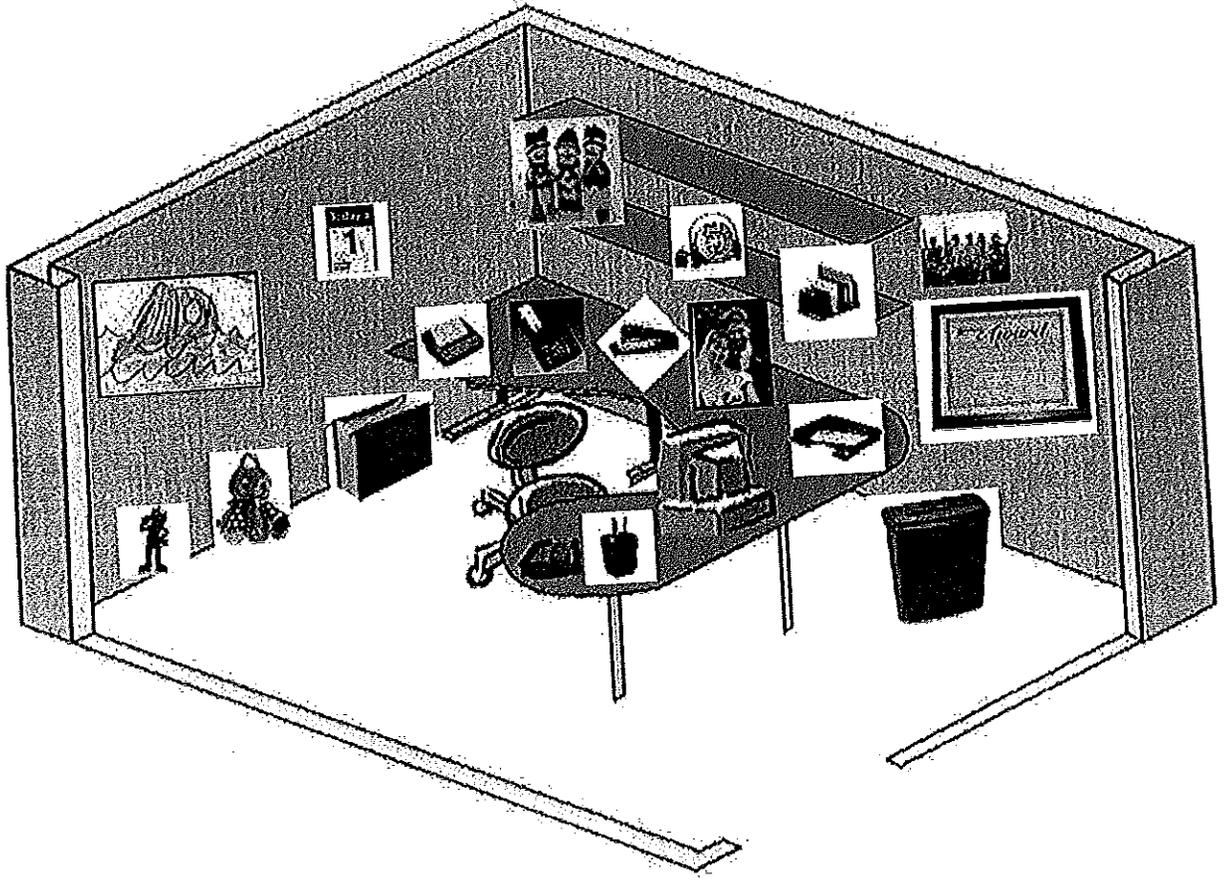
For the former, they presented study participants with this nondescript cubicle:



Along with the description of a fictional employee:

Eric is a manager in his mid-thirties, who has been with his company for five years. He is married and has two kids. Eric's performance evaluations are consistently strong, and he is considered very professional.

Participants were asked to then use a selection of stickers to decorate Eric's office based on their mental image of what it might look like. Some stickers clearly referenced work (file folders, for example), others were neutral (a tissue box), and some referenced nonwork (children's drawings or toys). On average, this is what Eric's office ended up looking like:



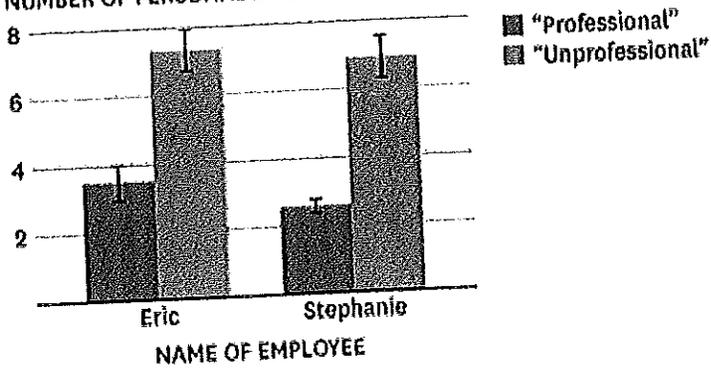
The differences are small but striking. While both professional and unprofessional Eric have office supplies and family photos in their cubicles, unprofessional Eric also makes use of what appear to be holiday decorations, a poster of Elmo, and a Discman. It's noteworthy, Heaphy told me, that the number of objects remained similar in both scenarios — in other words, you can't simply say that an unprofessional person is messier.

Heaphy and her colleagues also asked participants to complete the same exercise with a female employee named Stephanie. Interestingly, they found no statistically significant differences in how professionalism was gauged based on gender:

GENDER AND PROFESSIONALISM

Study participants expected similar proportions of personal items in both men's and women's offices.

NUMBER OF PERSONAL SYMBOLS



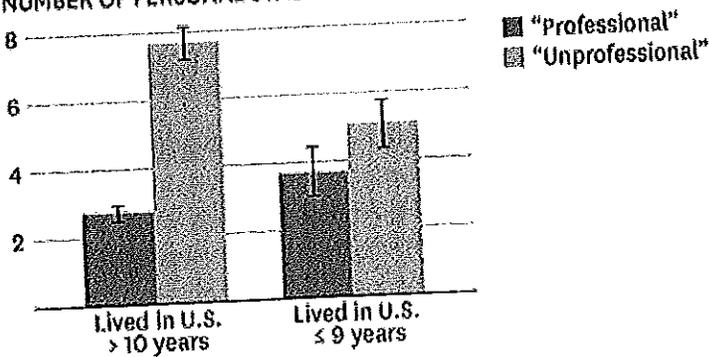
SOURCE "ACTING PROFESSIONAL: AN EXPLORATION OF CULTURALLY BOUNDED NORMS AGAINST NONWORK ROLE REFERENCING" (2013) HBR.ORG

But there was a significant difference in judging professionalism when they looked at how long participants had worked in the U.S.

DOES AMOUNT OF TIME IN THE U.S. MATTER?

Study participants with a longer tenure in the U.S. were more likely to associate nonwork symbols with a lack of professionalism.

NUMBER OF PERSONAL SYMBOLS



SOURCE "ACTING PROFESSIONAL: AN EXPLORATION OF CULTURALLY BOUNDED NORMS AGAINST NONWORK ROLE REFERENCING" (2013) HBR.ORG

This suggests that filling one's office with strictly work-related items "is learned with experience living in the United States rather than a culturally universal feature of appropriate workplace behavior."

So why is this important?

For one, it highlights how deeply rooted religious ideology still is in America. Heaphy and her co-authors trace what's unique about the U.S. — "maintaining unemotional, polite, and impersonal workplace interactions" — to what's referred to as the "Protestant Relational Ideology." Basically, this is a

theory originally developed by political economist Max Weber and based on "the need to put aside personal concerns to devote full attention to one's work so as to fulfill one's moral and spiritual calling." It may sound out-of-date, but its effects aren't. In one depressing example, a recent paper about unemployment found that "psychic harm from unemployment is about 40 percent worse for Protestants than for the general population." In another, women with children reported receiving unfair treatment when they violated the norm that "workers should devote full time, uninterrupted hours to paid work."

Related, but perhaps even more significant, is how cultural norms affect today's more global business environment. Just as it's no longer true that "work" means "being in an office from 9-5," it's no longer the case that Indian businesspeople stay in India, or that U.S. execs remain in the States. "Confusion about a tacit norm... is only enhanced by the growing globalization of the workplace that increasingly brings workers together across national borders," write the study's authors. This can "result in misinterpretations and misunderstandings." In fact, one of the most important things people must do when working in new cultures "is to discover and respect the norms of their new setting, or suffer the consequences."

But right now, those consequences might unfairly be pushing — or at least excluding — non-Americans.

And what if U.S. businesspeople work abroad?

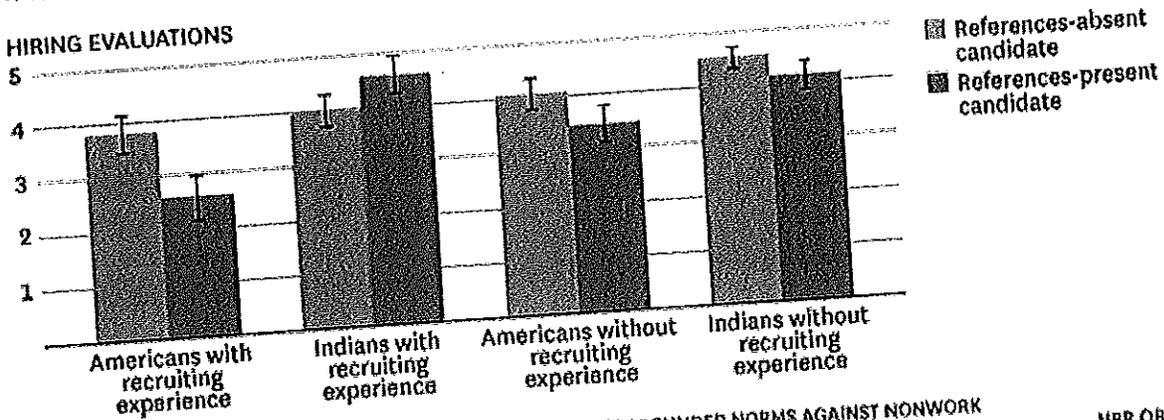
"The question we don't have the answer to is, 'What are the ways people evaluate professionalism in other countries?'" Heaphy explained, referring to the dearth of scholarly literature on workplace norms worldwide. "In the U.S., with a Protestant Relational Ideology, you need to be completely devoted to work. We don't have a similar theory as to why other countries would be different." But given the chart above, we can guess that they likely are.

This assumption is further evidenced by the next portion of the same study. Researchers asked American and Indian participants to evaluate a job candidate based in part on how he or she would build rapport with a potential client. In one set of circumstances, the candidate would make reference to a photo of the client's family; in the other, he or she would only discuss the location of the office or the view out the window. Participants were then asked whether they would recommend hiring the candidate.

While there was no statistical difference between Indian and American participants when it came to the latter example, the researchers found that "U.S. participants with recruiting experience negatively evaluated the candidate who engaged in nonwork role referencing, whereas Indian participants with recruiting experience did not." In addition, "Job candidates' success in advancing to the next stage of the hiring process was increased when they minimized references to nonwork roles in a U.S. but not Indian context."

HOW U.S. AND INDIAN RECRUITERS VIEW NONWORK ROLES
 U.S. participants with recruiting experience negatively evaluated the candidates who discussed talking to a potential client about family.

HIRING EVALUATIONS



SOURCE "ACTING PROFESSIONAL: AN EXPLORATION OF CULTURALLY BOUNDED NORMS AGAINST NONWORK ROLE REFERENCING" (2013)

HBR.ORG

Much more research needs to be done in this area, according to Heaphy, including these potential paths: When, and under what conditions, might cultural ideologies of professionalism change? Do men and women feel as though they have different leeway in terms of displaying personal items? And do different types of workplace items or discussions — say, ones related to sports or family — elicit different reactions when people are trying to make sense of professionalism?

<https://hbr.org/2014/03/what-does-professionalism-look-like>