

CAREER COUCH

Sticky Fingers in the Supply Closet

By MATT VILLANO Published: April 30, 2006

Q. The office supply cabinet at work overflows with pens and Post-it notes, and you figure that nobody will notice if you take some extra stuff. At what point does stocking up become stealing?



Chris Reed

A. As tempting as it may be to raid the supply cabinet regularly, the moment you take more than what you need to do your job, you're committing theft. Joel Saltzman, president of Shake That Brain, a business consulting company in San Diego, said that employees who took a five-finger discount at work were no different from people who shoplift from Staples or Office Depot. "Stealing is stealing," he said. "One too many is too many, whether it's a pen or a box of pens or a carton of pens or a laptop computer."

Q. Is this problem widespread?

A. Two recent surveys on the subject produced very different results. One of the reports, released last week by Lawyers.com, a legal resources company in New Providence, N.J., found that 18 percent of the 2,350 surveyed workers admitted to having taken office supplies for personal use. But a 2005 report from Vault.com, a career information firm in Manhattan, said 67 percent of the 1,150 people it questioned acknowledged the same offense.

Tracking distribution of office supplies is inherently tricky, because everyone needs to use these items at work, and many employees need to use them outside the office as well. C. Kerry Fields, a professor of business law and ethics at the University of Southern California, said he worried that an employee might see others taking office supplies and conclude that everyone had implicit permission to take what they wanted. "I think everyone is doing this to some degree," he said. "You can only take the ethical theory of relativism so far until it hits you: 'This is wrong.'"

Q. What's so enticing about the office supply cabinet?

A. Many employees see the supply cabinet as a cookie jar without a lid. Roberta Chinsky Matuson, president of Human Resource Solutions, a consulting company in Northampton, Mass., says that because supplies are there for the taking, workers apparently see no problem in grabbing whatever they can — to the point that it becomes habit to help themselves to a pen or an extra pad of paper.

Ms. Matuson added that while most companies had an office manager, that person was too busy to police every pen and paper clip. "Psychologically, knowing nobody's watching makes it easier for employees to justify taking more than they should," she said.

Employees also may raid the cabinet because they feel overworked or otherwise mistreated. Dr. Doreen R. Orion, a psychiatrist in Boulder, Colo., and the author of "I Know You Really Love Me" (McMillan/Dell), said that when employees felt unappreciated at work or in life, they lashed out as a way of expressing their dissatisfaction. "Their emotions are so overwhelming for them that this is a way to re-establish equilibrium," Dr. Orion said.

Finally, a person's reason for pilfering office supplies may be purely practical: money. Printer paper costs about \$3 a package at the local drugstore, but it costs nothing when you take it from the printer room at work. Dr. Orion noted that an employee who was tight on cash and felt underpaid might see office supplies as an earned, nonmonetary bonus.

Q. Which items are most likely to disappear?

A. Smaller objects are easy to conceal, so it's no surprise that these are the ones taken most often. A 2006 study by Pendaflex, a division of the Esselte Corporation, an office supplies maker in Melville, N.Y., indicated that 75 percent of the 2,600 surveyed employees admitted to stealing pens and pencils, while 38 percent said they stole company stationery. The Lawyers.com researchers said that file folders, staplers and scissors also ranked high on the list.

In other cases, employees have been known to steal items of greater value, including computers, chairs, keyboards, modems, software, computer monitors and memory sticks. In contrast to supplies such as pads and pencils, however, these products are easier to track.

Q. What should you do if you suspect that a colleague is stealing supplies?

A. It may be difficult to determine when a co-worker's restocking habits have gone too far. If a colleague goes through a box of paper clips a week, for example, using five boxes each month would not be excessive for that person. Kevin J. Fleming, an independent business consultant in Jackson, Wyo., said that unless a company specified limits for each item, it was nearly impossible to determine objectively if someone was going overboard.

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Still, if you feel strongly that a colleague is abusing supply-cabinet privileges, speak up. Discuss the situation with your colleague first, giving that person the opportunity to return the excess supplies. If the colleague denies wrongdoing but you still feel that he's a thief, consider reporting him to the office manager, a representative in the human resources department or your boss.

"Ultimately the answer for these questions comes from leadership," Mr. Fleming said. "If you suspect a colleague is taking supplies for his personal use, it's up to leadership to step in and tell that person what he can and cannot do."

Q. Can an employee be fired for this behavior?

A. Companies can pursue legal action against employees for taking too many supplies. Frederick D. Baron, chairman of the employment practice at Cooley Godward, a law firm in Palo Alto, Calif., said the fact that most office items were of minor value did not necessarily prevent a company from taking stiff action against an employee caught stealing them.

If an employer looks at pilfering as a serious ethical breach, it can end a person's employment, he said. "It only has to happen once to become a problem."

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