

Workers' top peeves: Extreme temperatures, office filth

Survey: Biggest worker turnoffs are dirty bathrooms, office temperature

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Forget salaries, expense accounts or keys to the executive washroom. Employee loyalty is won or lost over the cleanliness of the bathrooms and the amount of sticky goo on the carpet.

One in three workers surveyed recently said they had accepted a job — or quit one — because of the most basic working conditions. The respondents' chief complaints by far: the state of the indoor atmosphere, the gripes being about either hot-as-the-tropics heating or Antarctic air conditioning.

Corporate managers searching for new office space think mostly about rent and whether the layout and location will work for their companies, said Johnny Winton, president of Blumberg Capital Partners, which commissioned the survey. "They're not really thinking ... 'Will my employees be OK working in this environment?'"

Julie Buckner knows what Winton's talking about. The 40-year-old Los Angeles resident is a veteran of what she dubbed "the office temperature wars."

"I always run hot," she said, recalling how she tricked her co-workers at several local public relations firms by surreptitiously powering up the air conditioner.

When her office mates began to shiver, she said, "My M.O. was to tell them, 'You must just be imagining that it's getting colder.'"

Buckner now runs a consulting firm from her guesthouse, favoring a decor that includes candles and cut roses. She has one employee, but Buckner's hand rules the thermostat, generally keeping it at 64 to 68 degrees.

Blumberg's survey of 500 workers was the first of its kind, Winton said. The Coral Gables-based company develops and manages high-end commercial office buildings in Florida and Texas.

"We thought that the office building itself could have some major play" in an employer's ability to attract and keep workers, Winton said.

Apparently it does. More than three quarters of those polled in December said the overall condition of their offices affected how they viewed their employer and whether they were likely to stay in their jobs.

And 30 percent said they worried that unhealthy or unsafe conditions in their building might make them sick.

A worker's focus on disagreeable office conditions may be more a symptom of a larger problem than the sole cause for a defection, said Amy Lyman, co-founder of the Great Place to Work Institute, a San Francisco-based consulting company.

People don't quit just because the bathrooms are dirty, she said, but because employers that don't keep the bathrooms clean don't respond to other worker concerns as well.

The bathroom message is that "these are not high-trust environments," she said.

Apart from extreme temperatures, filthy bathrooms were among the most commonly cited problems in the survey, along with outdated furniture or decor, persistent foul smells, leaky ceilings or windows, worn carpeting and rodents or insects.