

CUBICLE CULTURE

Cleaning Staffs Keep Offices From Ripening Into Lab Experiments

MEETING ROOM A would be a health hazard if it weren't for the cleaning crew, Palina Palushaj and her colleagues. In this midtown Manhattan conference room on a Friday night, half-eaten bagels and muffins invite pests, an old quart of milk invites trouble and abandoned cream cheese in a tub has cracks like a dry river bed.

The carpet, possibly once blue, camouflages what sounds like sizable pebbles rattling through the heavy-duty vacuum cleaner on every thrust. And the trash bins, filled with some form of garbage juice, risk leaking on that same carpet, which wouldn't be the first time.

It's enough to make you want to wear a Hazmat suit, or at least falconer gloves. Instead, Ms. Palushaj sports a light-blue coat, pearl earrings and necklace, and pale red lipstick. If she gets splattered with any questionable substance, "I go to the kitchen and wash my hands right away," she says in one of her few unsmiling moments.



By Jared Sandberg

Along her three-floor route, she'll empty wastepaper baskets, drag her green terry washcloth over desks and keyboards, and vacuum. She barely sees her husband, Vasel, outside weekends.

Few jobs in the office are as thankless as the night cleaning shift, and none are as gross. The hours are as brutal as the strain on the lower back. Most cleaners aren't allowed to move a single sheet of paper on a desk, but they're the ones accused of tossing out a crucial contract or that Texas A&M cup holder someone cherished. "The cleaning people are the first ones to get blamed if something goes wrong during the night," says Fred Bishop, a 25-year veteran of cleaning company First Quality Maintenance. "People get [angry] because I made their desk neater than they left it."

AND YET MANY cleaners say they'd never trade their work for a desk job. It's not as confining, they say, and time moves fast. It's great for nonmorning people and it pays a decent wage. Unionized employees in New York can make more than \$20 an hour plus benefits. With 35 years on the job, Ms. Palushaj has enough vacation and sick days to stockpile into five-week vacations each summer to return to her birthplace of Montenegro.

"I don't think I could sit in an office in a cubicle all day and just go out for lunch," adds Mr. Bishop. "Eight hours would drive me nuts."

He has witnessed everything from a suicide jump from a nearby building to a couple having sex in an office. "You tell yourself, 'Well, I didn't see anything.'"

In the same way archaeologists reconstruct the customs of ancient civilizations through the study of their trash, cleaners can tell much about office inhabitants, often without ever meeting them. They can tell when someone's on a diet (Weight Watchers wrappers) or hasn't yet started worrying about their cholesterol when perhaps they should (you know who you are, Mr. Roast Beef with Melted Swiss). They can tell when the document someone is drafting isn't going well, and who is making a real effort to organize, judging by the flurry of hole-puncher chads, many of which miss the can.

Cleaner Rocio Espinal, who also works for First Quality Maintenance, theorizes that the heavy gum chewer is stressed and that the ice eater may be pregnant, which she later confirmed. But this garbology doesn't solve the most perplexing mystery to neatnik office cleaners: How can some people be so lazy. Ms. Espinal can't understand why someone who drops a pen wouldn't pick it up and prevent an inky explosion should her vacuum later hit it.

Similarly, Joaquin Parrilla, who empties 750 trash cans each night on the 13 floors of a building he works in downtown, is dumbfounded that he keeps finding jetsam in strange places. "You say to yourself, 'Why is this person throwing garbage behind the file cabinets when there's a pail at their feet?'" says Mr. Parrilla.

Yet, one woman yelled at him for throwing out an aged cup of coffee too soon. "I practically saved her life," he says.

FORTY-YEAR VETERAN cleaner Eleanor Hoffman wants to know what's with all those under-desk shoes. "We're talking about 10 to 15 pairs of shoes," says Ms. Hoffman, who works for Harvard Maintenance. "How many pairs of shoes could you wear in one day?" They make it impossible for her to vacuum.

She also fumes over the adults who play basketball with coffee cups.

Ms. Palushaj has no such interest in studying the trash. "I don't look," she says, even though she returned someone's engagement ring after finding it on the floor.

It's 7:51 p.m., not halfway through her shift, which ends at midnight. After, Ms. Palushaj will take a train north to arrive home at 2:20 a.m. Except for a 9 p.m. "lunch break," she will be on her feet for seven hours, pushing her wheeled 50-gallon trashcan dripping with extra garbage bags and pulling her Euroclean 7-amp vacuum cleaner.

By evening's end, she will empty 149 trash bins and vacuum more than 25,000 square feet, which on this night takes until 11:40 p.m. "It's peaceful. Nobody bothers you," she says. "How do you work in a cubicle farm without going crazy? It's boring."

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