

Life at work can be dangerous, and then there's the bacteria

By Amy Yelin, Globe Correspondent, 8/15/04

When it comes to the office, you're probably better off working in a bathroom stall than at your desk.

The average office desk has 21,000 bacteria per square inch while the average toilet seat has... 50, according to researcher Chuck Gerba, a microbiologist at the University of Arizona. That's an impressive 400 times fewer germs for toilets.

Why the difference? Although we spend much of our working lives at our desks, it turns out most of us rarely clean them (unless you're one of those rare breeds who keeps a can of Lysol and a dust buster on hand at all times). We'll eat over them, spill coffee and juice on them, but clean our desks? Forget about it.

The office rest room, however, typically gets a lot more attention, including a cleaning every night.

I was intrigued by Gerba's findings. So I picked up my keyboard the other day and inspected it. It wasn't pretty. I've been working at this particular desk for only three months, so most of the dried food particles, potato chip crumbs, and rainbow-colored stains that were in just about every nook and cranny of that keyboard could not all have come from me.

Then I went to the office bathroom and checked the toilet seat. Spotless.

I stumbled upon the Gerba research while browsing through a book called the "100 Most Dangerous Things in Everyday Life and What You Can Do About Them," by Laura Lee.

I figured that in case I didn't have enough things to be paranoid about, I should see what Lee had to say.

By now, we are all aware that typing at awkward angles causes carpal tunnel syndrome, computer screens are bad for our eyes, and fluorescent office lighting can give some people a major migraine. But according to Lee, there are other, less obvious threats lurking about our cubes and supply cabinets about which we might also want to obsess.

Take office supplies. While most of us consider things like staplers, erasers, and rulers harmless, Lee says these items injure more than 13,000 people every year.

And what about those pesky paper clips? Next time you get the urge to take one, untwist it, and use it for the purpose of personal hygiene, I strongly advise you to resist.

According to the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System, which tracks emergency room visits for injuries caused by consumer products, more paper clips are ending up in people's ears, noses, and throats than on paper, where the manufacturer intended them to be.

Lee's book also highlights some of the other, innovative ways our fellow workers have mutilated themselves with office supplies: "accidentally put correction fluid in eye thinking it was eye drops," "accidentally drank computer ink with water," "sat on letter opener and pierced left buttock." Ouch.

While I've never received anything more than a nasty paper cut and perhaps a stapled finger in all my years in an office, Lee's book left me feeling a little nervous.

To feed my neurosis, I decided to continue my research and check out the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website to see what it had to say about office injuries.

American office workers are an awkward bunch, according to the CDC, with employee falls being the most common office accident. So keep a sharp eye out for open file drawers, electrical cords, loose carpeting, and slippery floors. And just to be on the safe side, the CDC offers instructions for "proper" falling techniques.

And then there's heavy lifting. Ever watch some people try to change the water cooler bottle? Although I couldn't find any statistics on how many and what types of injuries these bottles cause in the office each year, I imagine it's a pretty high number of strains and sprains.

In fact, just last week a colleague of mine injured her wrist while trying to maneuver a hulking jug onto the top of the cooler and line it up just so.

Perhaps that's why in many offices only one or two people seem to be the ones risking life and limb to supply the rest of us with water. This then creates another threat: bitter colleagues. In my experience, those who repeatedly change the water bottle do not appreciate those, like myself, who avoid this task at all costs.

A former receptionist, for example, began leaving signs on the empty water bottles that read PLEASE CHANGE OR ELSE. My choices were now to risk getting caught sneaking water from the bottles I never changed, or to become

dehydrated. From a safety perspective, neither option looked particularly promising.

So with all these hazards threatening to take us down at the office, what's a poor worker to do? The first solution I came up with was self-employment. If it's the office environment that's the problem, all we need to do is eliminate the environment and work from home, right? Wrong.

Alas, even self-employment has made it into Lee's book. She says those who are self-employed work more hours, deal with more stress and uncertainty, have less access to healthcare and, in the end, have a greater risk of dying on the job than those who work for someone else.

Sound's like all that's left for us to do is to go to work, put on our best hazmat suits, move our desks into the bathroom, and hope for the best.