

## **Take it from her, office theft is not always that petty**

**Amy Yelin, Globe Correspondent, 6/29/03**

I have a confession to make. When I was 12, I shoplifted three iron-on patches from Woolworth's. Some friends and I were playing truth or dare with some boys and, feeling it was crucial that I demonstrate my brave womanly ways in the spirit of Helen Reddy ("I am woman, hear me roar" was popular at the time), I slipped the Disney character patches in my coat pocket and walked out.

As an adult, I'd like to say that I've never taken anything that wasn't mine. And, in most situations, this statement would be true. No matter how tempting, I always resist taking a dollar from the tip cup at Starbucks when the barista isn't looking. And I am plagued by guilt any time I even fantasize about slipping a magazine from the gym or the doctor's office into my oversize handbag. But for some reason, when it comes to items from work, my good conscience and integrity go right out the supply closet window.

During my years working for various employers, I've been guilty of acquiring everything from ballpoint pens, to pads of paper, to envelopes, to postage (lots of postage), to sticky-notes, to those multisized clips that you squeeze to grasp paper or to stop the circulation in your fingertips, depending on how adept you are at using them.

My worst offense, however, was unintentional yet I still came off looking like an accessory after the fact. One afternoon, when I was returning from a lunch break, I held the door for a nice-looking man in a nice-looking suit as he was in the process of robbing our office. I smiled and said hello as he disappeared, nice-looking \$4,000 laptop in hand, forever.

Accidental or intentional, I'm not proud of my occasional petty office theft. So to make myself feel better and confirm that I wasn't the only one succumbing to temptation, I asked friends, family, and former colleagues if they'd ever taken anything from work. As it turned out, everyone had.

Interestingly enough, while none of these people would leave a restaurant without paying or shoplift (except for my sister who used to steal forks from restaurants when she was a struggling actress) no one felt much remorse about taking small items from their employer. In fact, most people sounded downright entitled about it.

Case in point: one girlfriend who said "Hey, I worked plenty of overtime and wasn't paid for it. So I guess you could say I earned the right to take a few things here and there."

A few people, however, were quick to point out that taking one pen every few months from their company is vastly different and less offensive than taking pens - or anything for that matter - in bulk. In other words, when it comes to office property, the consensus on the street is "Bulk is bad, but individual theft is A-OK."

Fascinated by this seemingly different set of ethical standards for company property, I decided to investigate some of the recent research in business ethics. Turns out there are several theories as to why otherwise upstanding, moral, and law-abiding citizens - such as I - are bold enough to take from the hand that feeds them. Some ethics educators believe it's because a company is a faceless entity - so it's not as if you're stealing from an actual person. Others theorize that some employees - like my girlfriend quoted above - have a sense of entitlement, of having "credit" stored up from all the hard work put in at a job. A variation of that theory (and also my favorite explanation because I like the name) is "feeding the hog." According to a report on the Ethics Resource Center website, there once was a lumber company whose profits were slipping and nobody could understand why. A consultant discovered that employees weren't being treated very well and as a result, when frustrated and angry, they would "feed the hog" - which meant putting finished wood rather than scrap wood into the mechanical wood chipper.

The author of this report proceeds to speculate that "employees in nearly every organization 'feed the hog' - finding their own unique way of punishing or hurting employers for perceived wrongs."

Although it's hard to imagine that taking a pen or a pad of paper here or there can really be hurtful to an organization, all this collective "feeding the hog" can add up to one pretty sick swine. According to statistics from the American Databank Group, in 2002, workplace theft topped out at more than \$120 billion annually, and contributed to 30 percent of all business failures. Ouch. Think about that the next time you're contemplating simply "borrowing" some computer paper.

Still, even if we were all to realize our wrongdoings and stop pilfering from our employers, there exists another problem: stealing from one another. I find this practice particularly annoying, especially when something is stolen from me. Once again, in the colleague-to-colleague theft category, pens seem to be a popular item. Who hasn't seen their favorite pen - the perfect writing instrument that feels like silk in your hand and never leaks - disappear only to be replaced by some greasy, nibbled-on object that leaks like a sieve and turns your fingers

blue? Staplers are particularly hot items as well. If you're fortunate enough to have one in your possession that doesn't jam every other time you use it, forcing you to pick out the staples and give yourself a puncture wound, I recommend locking it away in a drawer.

Other items are potential targets only in certain offices. For instance, books appear to be a huge temptation for those working at publishing houses and newspapers. As one editor friend of mine put it, "You could leave a diamond ring on your desk without fear, but let a book out of your sight for five minutes and you can forget about it."

Finally, one can't write a column about workplace theft without at least mentioning the risk both employers and employees run of being the victim of an "outside job," such as that of my buddy the nicely dressed laptop burglar. I recently read about a woman in New Jersey who would dress professionally, enter an office, seek out the first unattended workstation she could find and then proceed to reward herself with some poor soul's credit cards and personal checks. She was so good at her chosen line of work that she accumulated \$40,000 in fraudulent purchases and bank withdrawals before she was apprehended.

So mind your bags, ladies and gentlemen. And, if you can, quit "feeding the hog." You'll feel better. As a reformed "feeder" myself, I know I do.