



Pollution

Workplace waste, recycling and the night they took the bins away

Leaving workers nowhere to dump their rubbish makes it harder to recycle, writes Pilita Clark

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by: **Pilita Clark**

My desk at the Financial Times is mostly very dull.

There is a computer and a phone, surrounded by a pile of guff I keep meaning to read and, because I am the FT's environment correspondent, a wildlife calendar someone sent me that this month shows a photo of a large toad getting ready to spawn.

But down on the floor by my right, there is something much more interesting, an object so rare and endangered I am not even sure it is legal: a bin.

Actually, it is an acting bin, an empty cardboard box nicked from near the stationery

cupboard, one of many makeshift containers I have used since The Great Disappearance of the sturdy metal office bins that once sat conveniently next to every desk.

These all vanished one night, replaced by a scattering of communal recycling containers with bossy, confusing signs about what sort of rubbish should go where.

This sort of set-up is becoming the norm in offices everywhere and, as so often with workplace innovations, it does not always go well.

I know of a company where a senior employee found his personal bin had disappeared and the new recycling containers were about 20 feet away from his desk.

Enraged, he threw his coffee cup, cake and a piece of fruit halfway towards the recycling station, yelling at a hapless passing building manager in charge of the new arrangements: “I could only reach that far, now you clean it up.”

There is no excuse for that type of behaviour, not least because it leads to books like *Who moved my cheese?* (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/92cf9962-e1b4-11dc-a302-000779fd2ac.html>) and other dreary motivational literature about overcoming resistance to change.

But the question of who moved my bin is worth asking because it turns out that, if you really want to improve office recycling, you should leave the bin where it is.

The evidence for this is all around my office, where recycling station dissidents generally take the sneakier course of resistance that I favour.

A number of colleagues use a spot on the floor next to their chair as a kind of bin-without-walls, creating a swelling mound of litter they eventually haul off to one of the authorised recycling containers, more or less hoping they have picked the right one.

Another has pinched an old-fashioned metal bin, like the ones we lost, from a meeting room. The man at the desk next to me uses a box just like mine, though admittedly only because I put it there to stem the flow of empty crisp packets lobbed at my feet when aiming at my bin.

I doubt any of this would surprise the people behind [research \(https://www.kab.org/news-info/press-releases/keep-america-beautiful-announces-results-%E2%80%9Cr recycling-work%E2%80%9D-research-study\)](https://www.kab.org/news-info/press-releases/keep-america-beautiful-announces-results-%E2%80%9Cr recycling-work%E2%80%9D-research-study) by the Keep America Beautiful

organisation, about how to improve recycling in the office.

After studying behaviour in 34 offices in Atlanta, Boston, Houston and San Diego, the researchers concluded that you can increase the amount recycled if you put the right sort of bins next to people's desks because it is so much more convenient.

This is surprising because it is the convenience of desk-side bins that seems to have doomed them.

[The government of Jersey \(https://www.gov.je/Environment/WasteReduceReuseRecycle/WhyRecycle/Pages/QuickGuideWork.aspx\)](https://www.gov.je/Environment/WasteReduceReuseRecycle/WhyRecycle/Pages/QuickGuideWork.aspx), to pick a random but typical example, specifically advises employers on its website to get rid of desk bins that make it “too easy to throw things away” and replace them with communal recycling stations.

But Keep America Beautiful found that, if you put a recycling bin next to each desk, alongside a smaller rubbish container, you can increase office recycling by 20 per cent and slash contamination of the recyclable materials too. Put simply, “increasing convenience improved recycling behaviour”.

This is excellent news. I have never been proud of my cardboard bin. There are two perfectly good recycling drops seven steps away from my desk and it would do me good to get off my chair-bound bottom every now and then.

I could not agree more with Pope Francis, whose environmental encyclical last year berated humans for ignoring nature's “exemplary” ecosystems and creating a throwaway culture that makes much of Earth look like “an immense pile of filth”.

But I still like having my own bin.

There is a broader environmental lesson here, confirmed most recently by the [nearly 400,000 \(http://www.theweek.co.uk/tesla-model-3/70320/tesla-model-3-prices-specs-and-ludicrous-mode-confirmed\)](http://www.theweek.co.uk/tesla-model-3/70320/tesla-model-3-prices-specs-and-ludicrous-mode-confirmed) people lining up to buy the new, affordable Tesla electric car. Punishing polluters is fine and often necessary. But the best way to make people change is to give them something they actually want.

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Sarah O'Connor is away

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