



Photo Illustration by Michael McMullan / The Commercial Appeal

Cleaning up the office fridge can become a virtual haz-mat job if the rules aren't followed.

# Icebox rules

*The venerable office refrigerator can chill food and relations*

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THERE ARE TIMES when the big cold box in your breakroom should have a warning sign.

Toxic waste inside, use at your own risk.

The office refrigerator is a place where salad mingles with bologna and where all workers are equal. And how they use or misuse that refrigerator can generate a lot of heat.

Keeping a clean, clutter-free fridge requires consideration and cooperation on the part of users, according to one etiquette expert.

About 18 people use the refrigerator at the First Tennessee branch on Summer in Bartlett.

There, the rule is simple, said Lester Brown, vice president and sales manager for the branch.

"Yo mamma don't work here. Clean up after yourself," Brown said.

An admitted stickler for cleanliness, Brown says his people are pretty good about keeping the clutter down and the spills cleaned up.

## THE OFFICE REFRIGERATOR

When you start a new job, they tell you all the rules about vacations, sick days and whether they'll be open when it snows.

But it's a good bet nobody tells you what the rules are for the office refrigerator.

If nobody has cooked up rules for your workplace refrigerator, here are some to get you started.

- Don't eat other people's food.
- If you spill it, clean it up.
- If it's yours and it's old, throw it away.
- Put your name and the date on whatever you leave inside and every Friday remove what you haven't eaten.
- Don't bring huge lunch carriers or a week's worth of frozen dinners. Don't leave bottles and jars of condiments that take up space.
- Establish a regular day to clean the refrigerator.
- The people who use the refrigerator the most should set up a rotating schedule for cleaning it.

See **FRIDGE, OVER**

*Continued from other side*

## FRIDGE

Still, he cleans the office refrigerator about once a month and after giving fair warning, nothing is spared.

"If it's your momma's good Tupperware, that's too bad," Brown said. "And nobody complains."

He thinks it's because they forgot something was there in the first place.

Brown's vigilance means the refrigerator remains clean.

"They don't leave stuff here like at some places I've been," said Mona Hurd, operations manager at the bank.

At another First Tennessee branch, the refrigerator was not as nice, she said.

"People would put stuff in there and let it stay," she said.

Hurd, who is more inclined to bring frozen dinners, wouldn't leave her lunch inside.

Not so at the Bartlett branch.

"I don't mind putting anything in there," she said.

Sharing at the office refrigerator can be trying, as people bring to work their personally acceptable levels of cleanliness and tolerance for clutter.

But it's possible to figure it out.

"It's all about cooperation. It's no different than a family," said Syndi Seid, founder of San Francisco-based Advanced Etiquette, an international business etiquette and protocol firm. Its clients include AT&T and Hewlett-Packard.

Part of the problem is that work is

now a second home for many people, she said.

"I'm going to blame some of it on the companies a little bit and on the fact that we keep telling our staff members that we want them to feel at home when they're working because they recognize we all spend many more hours at work, often, more than we do at our own homes," Seid said.

The blame, however, can't be placed solely on employers, Seid said. People are also more inconsiderate.

"Today people just don't really think through some of the consequences of their actions," she said. "Everybody else is doing it, why shouldn't I?"

Therefore, workplace refrigerators should come with instructions or rules for use, Seid said.

"I don't see anything wrong with posting a little sign on the refrigerator that would give some parameters for its use," she said.

At some workplaces, they actually do.

There are lessons to be learned from the Memphis Fire Department Station 16, which seems to have reached levels of optimum refrigerator management.

Each shift has a refrigerator. And they've got locks.

"It's multipurposed," said Lt. Sam Locastro at Station 16 on Lamar near Parkway where about 40 people share three refrigerators.

"We joke about other shifts taking food, but when we leave here (on a call)

there is nobody here," he said. Anybody could wander in and help themselves to a snack.

With 24-hour shifts, firefighters live at the stations. They buy their groceries with their own money, cook for themselves and at Station 16 the shift that works on Mondays cleans the kitchen, the stove and the refrigerator.

"They usually holler out if you've got something you want saved come and get it," Locastro said.

The crew rotates, so everybody takes a turn at the Monday duty. Because it's a regular duty, the refrigerator stays clean.

"We're a family away from our family and if it wasn't that way we would all be miserable," he said.

Rules for the workplace refrigerator should include reminders to clean up spills, throw away old food, and to remember that the limited amount of space is shared with others, Seid said.

The refrigerator should be cleaned every Friday and who cleans it should rotate.

"I would recommend it be a shared responsibility among the people who predominately use it," she said.

If the rules are followed, cleaning the office refrigerator should be a light duty.

"The bottom line is that we each need to be respectful and responsible for the things that we have and use within the workplace because it is a shared space," Seid said.

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