

Initial

Washroom behaviours

Understanding the state of office
washrooms and the habits of users



In 2016, Initial, global leader in hygiene solutions, commissioned a survey of 5,000 office workers in five markets around the world (Malaysia, UK, Australia, Germany and France) to get a better understanding of the state of hygiene, cleanliness and behaviours in office washrooms.

“I am never comfortable going to the toilet at work.”

Working closely with leading market research agency, ICM Unlimited, the survey was completed in October 2016.

Female, Aged 34, Australia

Despite access to sanitation and facilities in the developed world being better than at any other time in history, many people are still experiencing unhygienic or unsavoury washrooms and toilets. Unfortunately, a significant number of these experiences are occurring in the workplace washroom, which is concerning when you consider that people spend more time in the office than ever before and expect higher standards of hygiene and cleanliness.

Many office workers around the world have encountered dirty cubicles, bad smells and poor hygiene habits. Such experiences are particularly concerning as workplaces are the ideal environment for bacteria to breed and spread. In fact, 60% of work illnesses that result in time off sick are contracted from dirty office equipment¹. Poor behaviours and unsavoury experiences in office washrooms could exacerbate the problem and place workers' health at risk.

¹ Dr. Charles Gerba, University of Arizona

The state of our washrooms

Whilst most countries in the Western world are protected by regulations that govern workplace health and safety², research suggests unhygienic conditions are a common and, in some cases, regular occurrence. Around half (49%) of office workers say they've been 'shocked' by the state of the office washrooms, while 43% have found urine outside the toilet bowl, 20% have found faeces and 12% have found blood. This type of discovery would be shocking in any public washroom scenario, but it is especially unexpected and unwelcome in office environments.

Of those workers who found faeces outside of the bowl, 58% found it on the toilet seat, 34% on the cubicle floor and 19% on the wall. And while faeces is a more common occurrence in men's than in women's washrooms (22% of male office workers found faeces outside of the toilet bowl, compared to 17% of women), blood is a far more common contaminant in female toilets and is twice as likely to occur. In addition, almost half of female office workers (48%) have encountered an overflowing sanitary bin, leaving the vast majority (76%) "disgusted" by the experience. With the washroom in such poor state, it is no wonder that a significant proportion (31%) of

office workers said they would be unhappy if an important stakeholder or client used their office facilities.

By disregarding the cleanliness of their facilities, workers are unnecessarily placing their health and the health of their colleagues at risk. Unhygienic washrooms are the perfect place for bacteria to live and thrive, and are high-risk areas for cross contamination. A single gram of human faeces — which is about the weight of a paper clip — can contain one trillion microbes and, when not washed off, can be passed from person to person. Germs can also easily disperse through the air when toilets are flushed and can then rest on a person and

61%
of office workers want
cleaner washroom
facilities at their place of
business

their clothing. As we all carry around harmful germs without exhibiting any symptoms of illness, they can easily transfer onto or inside your body as eyes are rubbed or a sandwich is eaten for lunch.

The senior management team, office managers and key departments like HR need to be made aware of a widespread desire for better facilities; 61% of office workers are unhappy and want a cleaner and more hygienic washroom experience at work. But what behaviours need to be addressed?

² In the UK, The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 cover the supply of toilets and washing facilities for staff. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has a code of practice based on the law that explains the full requirements.



49%

have been
'shocked' at the
state of washrooms



43%

have found urine



20%

have found
faeces



12%

have found blood





72%

dislike others
failing to flush



54%

dislike others
leaving the toilet
in a messy state



33%

dislike others
leaving a terrible
smell



15%

dislike others
making terrible
sounds



Taking responsibility

Urging people to take responsibility for their toilet habits might be easier said than done. A clear disconnect exists between people's perceptions about their own habits and the habits of others. The vast majority (92%) of office workers claim they always leave the washroom in a state they would like to find it, and 89% say they always check the toilet seat and bowl after flushing. With so many people reporting disturbing and unpleasant experiences, this cannot be the case. Evidently, many workers appear to have a 'blind spot' when it comes to their own washroom practices.

At the same time, people are very critical of their co-workers. In what could be seen as a blame game, not flushing the toilet was the most disliked toilet habit by 72% of respondents. Other bad behaviours include leaving the toilet in a messy state (54%), making a terrible smell (33%) or sound (15%), and leaving the toilet seat up (14%).

Women tended to have less tolerance for unhygienic habits in the office washroom with 75% of female workers loathing the sight of an unflushed toilet compared to 70% of men, and 56% disliking a messy washroom compared to 52% of men.

Together, these insights reveal a socio-psychological diffusion of responsibility, as users become unlikely to take responsibility for their actions. In other words, the state of the washroom is often seen as somebody else's problem. Workers may feel like they are doing their best to improve conditions but this is clearly not enough. It takes everybody to work together to improve washroom experiences.

51%

of office workers worry about going to the washroom at work

“The sanitary bin was overflowing and covered with flies.”

Female, Aged 43, Malaysia

Breaking the toilet taboo

“I hate that everyone can hear and smell everything.”

Female, Aged 53, Germany

Toilet behaviours are governed by people’s emotions and people will change their usual behaviour as a result. For example, 50% of office workers admit not washing their hands because of the washroom environment; this can include a bad smell (16%), a dirty handwashing station (15%) or a queue for the sink or dryer (14%).

Emotion can also drive people to avoid the washroom altogether. 54% of office workers try to avoid, or simply do not defecate in the office washroom, with over a third (38%) of those saying it’s because they’re uncomfortable doing so, and a quarter (26%) because it isn’t clean enough or smells bad. As a result, 89% of office workers will choose to visit a different washroom in the

office depending on what they need “to do”, or will opt to use a disabled toilet despite not having a disability (29%). Indeed, one of the most common reasons for choosing a different washroom is for more privacy and because it is used by fewer people.

For many, embarrassment about the sounds and smells they make in the office washroom is a significant influence on their behaviour. In fact, 31% of office workers confess to being embarrassed by the smells they have made. These feelings are so pronounced that people try to disguise the noises they make; by flushing the toilet (52%), coughing (35%), padding the

toilet bowl with paper (25%) or humming (6%).

This emotional association also extends to other people. 35% of office workers wish they had not heard sounds made by other people in the washroom or toilet, and 54% feel disgusted when they notice a colleague not washing their hands after visiting the washroom despite only 24% having ever confronted a colleague about their poor handwashing habits.

So, why is the connection between emotion and toilet behaviour so strong? “Mostly it’s a question of concern,” comments Mark Reader, Group Category Director, Rentokil Initial. “That might be concern

54%

of office workers will
avoid or try to avoid
defecating in the office

for their own experience or a concern over the lack of hygiene in others. People are too scared, embarrassed or shy, to report when they notice a mess or something they have done. Washroom and toilet behaviours have been taught to us in early stages of our lives and are ingrained into our thinking, so these emotional responses are perfectly natural.

“Washroom hygiene is rarely spoken about and is often avoided. It elicits strong feelings of revulsion and embarrassment but, given the health implications, we need to overcome this emotional barrier and start to talk about this important issue.”



Promoting good behaviours

“Everyone should take responsibility and clean up after use.”

Female, Aged 38, France

The washroom environment has an important influence on people; both in promoting good habits or compounding bad behaviours. Only 67% of office workers said that the overall experience of their office washroom was good. At the same time, nearly 1 in 10 (9%) think that the other public places – such as bars and restaurants – offer better washroom experiences than their workplace. The message from office workers is clear: businesses should do more to create a pleasant, clean and hygienic washroom environment.

Improvements can begin with something as simple as smell. Given that 40% of office workers have been ‘shocked’ by the smell in the washroom, it is a good place to start. Smell can be a powerful

indicator of overall cleanliness. Only 57% said the smell of their office washroom was good. The use of automatic air fresheners and air purifiers can help to reassure users that the washroom is clean and well cared for. An obviously fresh and clean fragrance can be a powerful, yet subtle, way to shape the perceptions of users by drawing on memories of other clean environments or experiences. Keeping facilities well-stocked with toilet tissue, soap, hand towels and toilet seat cleaner is also important to ensure that the best personal hygiene practices are followed.

the spread of germs. Polite reminders to users to wash their hands properly – for at least 20 seconds with soap – can be incredibly effective. While advances in technology, such as no touch soap dispensers, can also encourage handwashing as people are less concerned with who has been there before and what they may have left behind on the surfaces.

Another example of a behaviour that businesses can easily promote is handwashing; one of the most important habits people can do to minimise





The business impact

While many businesses are looking at ways to increase and maximise efficiency and employee productivity, an immediate solution could be a little closer to home. If businesses make the most of their facilities, they are in a prime position to help promote positive behaviours and prevent the spread of sickness and disease.

Sickness means decreased productivity for those who struggle to work and zero productivity for those that need to take days off sick. The economic argument is compelling; according to insight from the Centre for Economic and Business Research (CEBR), the UK economy could save £13.7 billion if office hygiene standards are improved³. And that's just in one country. Global estimates put the cost of lost productivity due to illnesses caused by lack of sanitation and poor hygiene at up to 5% of GDP⁴.

There is a great deal to learn from workers' toilets experiences and habits. Although responsibility must be shared between office workers and the businesses that host them, it is vital that every effort is made to correct bad habits and deliver clean and hygienic washroom experiences for all.

£13.7bn
could be saved by the UK
economy if office hygiene
standards are improved³

³ CEBR, 2014
⁴ Hutton, 2012

About Initial

We are committed to keeping you healthy by providing high quality hygiene products and services that minimise your risk of exposure to bacteria and other infectious micro-organisms.

We take pride in delivering the highest levels of service to enable you to keep your organisation looking good, feeling healthy and most importantly hygienic.

Why choose Initial?

At Initial we believe in the smart use of hygiene so you're covered in all key risk areas, not just the washroom. Our broader approach will assist you in establishing good hygiene practice throughout your organisation, creating a healthier, more productive environment for everyone. You can choose from a convenient delivery of hygiene supplies to a complete rental maintenance service.

For more information, visit: www.initial.com