

PA ENTERPRISE

DeskDemon's Magazine for Executive PAs, Office Managers and Secretaries

June/July 2019

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reinforce gender bias**

**Menopause
discrimination –how
employers can help**

**Drunk at work –
the cost to the
economy**

**Office hacks to make
your worklife easier**

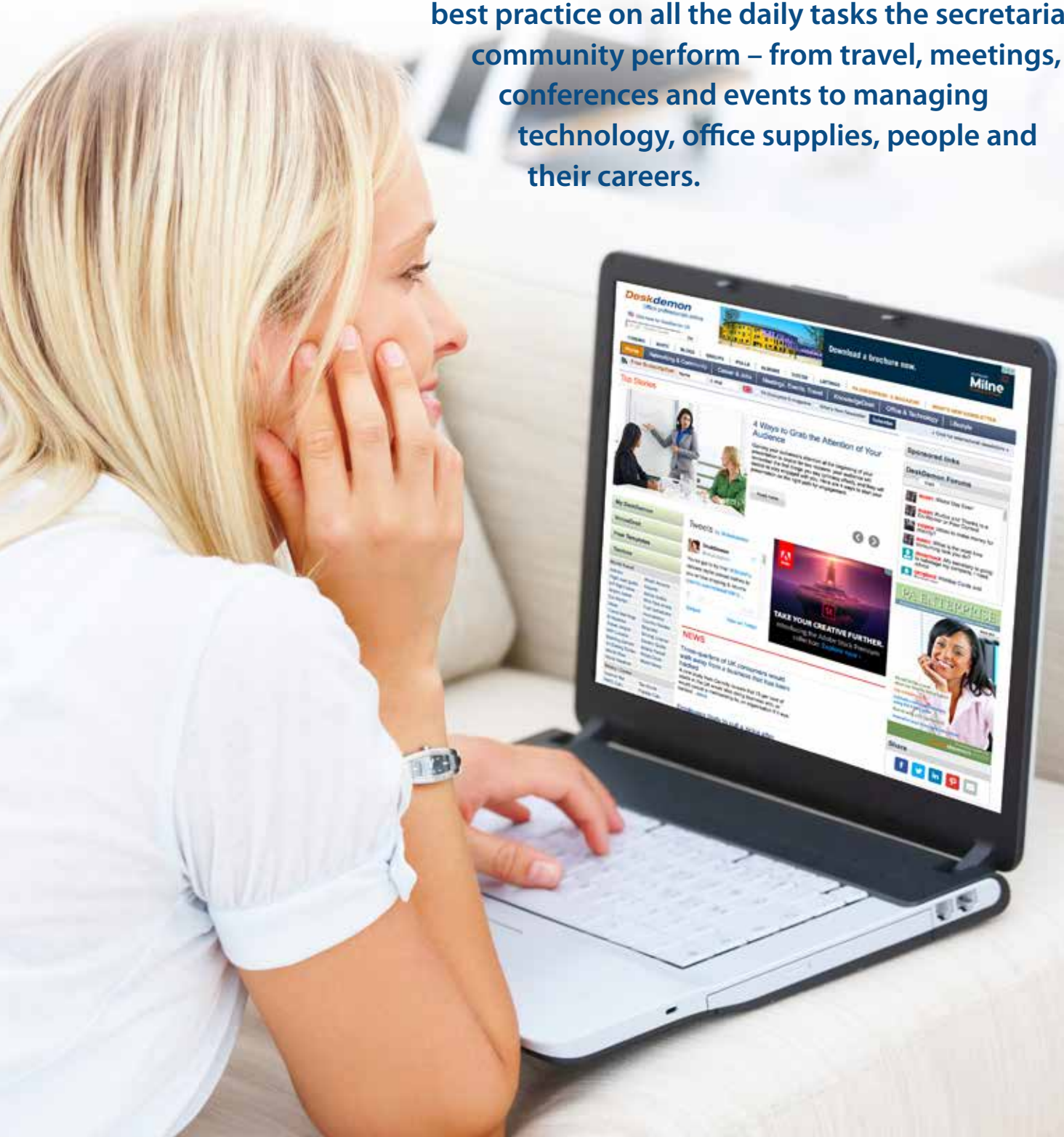
**Face the fear of career
change after 40**

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Siri and Alexa reinforce gender bias

Why do most virtual assistants that are powered by artificial intelligence – like Apple’s Siri and Amazon’s Alexa system – by default have female names, female voices and often a submissive or even flirtatious style? The problem, according to a new report released by Unesco, stems from a lack of diversity within the industry that is reinforcing problematic gender stereotypes.

“Obedient and obliging machines that pretend to be women are entering our homes, cars and offices,” Saniye Gulser Corat, Unesco’s director for gender equality, said in a statement. “The world needs to pay much closer attention to how, when and whether A.I. technologies are gendered and, crucially, who is gendering them.”

One particularly worrying reflection of this is the “deflecting, lackluster or apologetic responses” that these assistants give to insults.

The report borrows its title – “I’d Blush if I Could” – from a standard response from Siri, the Apple voice assistant, when a user hurled a gendered expletive at it. When a user tells Alexa, “You’re hot,” her typical response has been a cheery, “That’s nice of you to say!”

Siri’s response was recently altered to a more flattened “I don’t know how to respond to that,” but the report suggests that the technology remains gender biased, arguing that the problem starts with engineering teams that are staffed overwhelmingly by men.

“Siri’s ‘female’ obsequiousness – and the servility expressed by so many other digital assistants projected as young women – provides a powerful illustration of gender biases coded into technology products,” the report found.

Amazon’s Alexa, named for the ancient library of



Alexandria, is unmistakably female. Microsoft’s Cortana was named after an A.I. character in the Halo video game franchise that projects itself as a sensuous, unclothed woman. Apple’s Siri is a Norse name that means “beautiful woman who leads you to victory.” The Google Assistant system, also known as Google Home, has a gender-neutral name, but the default voice is female.

Baked into their humanized personalities, though, are generations of problematic perceptions of women. These assistants are putting a stamp on society as they become common in homes across the world, and can influence interactions with real women, the report warns. As the report puts it, “The more that culture teaches people to equate women with assistants, the more real women

will be seen as assistants – and penalized for not being assistant-like.”

Apple and Google declined to comment on the report. Amazon did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The publication – the first to offer United Nations recommendations regarding the gendering of A.I. technologies – urged tech companies and governments to stop making digital assistants female by default and to explore developing a gender-neutral voice assistant, among other guidance.

The systems are a reflection of broader gender disparities within the technology and A.I. sectors, Unesco noted in the report, which was released in conjunction with the government of Germany and the Equals Skills Coalition, which promotes gender balance in the technology sector.

Women are grossly underrepresented in artificial intelligence, making up 12% of A.I. researchers and 6 percent of software developers in the field.

The report noted that technology companies justify the use of female voices by pointing to studies that showed consumers preferred female voices to male ones. But lost in that conversation is research showing that people like the sound of a male voice when it is making authoritative statements, but a female voice when it is being “helpful,” further perpetuating stereotypes.

Experts say bias baked into A.I. and broader disparities within the programming field are not new – pointing to an inadvertently sexist hiring tool developed by Amazon and facial recognition technology that misidentified black faces as examples.

“It’s not always malicious bias, it’s unconscious bias, and lack of awareness that this unconscious bias exists, so it’s perpetuated,” said Allison Gardner, a co-founder of Women Leading in



A.I. “But these mistakes happen because you do not have the diverse teams and the diversity of thought and innovation to spot the obvious problems in place.”

But the report offers guidance for education and steps to address the issues, which equality advocates have long pushed for.

Dr. Gardner’s organization works to bring women working in A.I. together with business leaders and politicians to discuss the ethics, bias and potential for legislative frameworks

to develop the industry in a way that is more representative.

The group has published its own list of recommendations for building inclusive artificial intelligence, among them establishing a regulatory body to audit algorithms, investigate complaints and ensure bias is taken into account in the development of new technology.

“We need to change things now, because these things are being implemented now,” Dr. Gardner said, pointing to the rapid spread of A.I.-powered virtual assistants. “We are writing the standards now that will be used in the future.”

Dr. Gardner said that changes are also needed in education, because the bias was a symptom of systemic underrepresentation within a male-dominated field.

“The whole structure of the subject area of computer science has been designed to be male-centric, right down to the very semantics we use,” she said.

Although women now have more opportunities in computer science, more are disappearing from the field as they advance in their careers, a trend known as the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon.

“I would say they are actually being forced out by a rather female-unfriendly environment and culture,” Dr. Gardner said. “It’s the culture that needs to change.”

Vegans should be 'legally exempt from work tea rounds', says lawyer

According to lawyer Alex Monaco, vegans should be 'legally exempt from work tea rounds' on the grounds of discrimination as being vegan should be treated as a legally 'protected characteristic' under the Equality Act 2010.

Alex Monaco said: "If you were Jewish or Muslim and told to get a round of bacon sandwiches in, no one would bat an eyelid if you refused.

"But if you're vegan and refused to buy a pint of milk to make tea because you believe the dairy industry is torturing cows, then you would be laughed out of the kitchen.

Monaco, who is vegan himself, explained that many vegans also feel they are not catered for in the workplace struggle to find "plant-based" food in work canteens whilst the "sandwiches all have butter in them".

Legal advice

The lawyer says he has faced discrimination in the past whilst on holidays as he "couldn't eat anything from the butcher's or pizzeria," saying "I'm not even particularly vulnerable – so how do you think a vegan on a building site could be treated?"

Monaco will be offering free legal consultations to fellow vegans who claim they have been discriminated against because of their dietary orientation.

He believes that "The tide is changing now. It's a movement. If we can get

the law changed, people's views may follow on from that."

Workplace discrimination

A recent survey commissioned by employment law specialists, Crossland Employment Solicitors, revealed prejudiced attitudes towards vegan workers is endemic amongst UK employers.

Researchers conducting the study found that nearly half (45%) of 1,000 vegan employees questioned have felt discriminated against by employers, while nearly a third (31%) have felt harassed at work or unfairly treated due to their veganism, (rising to 36% amongst millennials).



BGT finalist's search for UK's happiest workplaces

Britain's Got Talent finalist Dave McPartlin has joined in the search for the nation's happiest workers and workplaces. The headteacher of Flakefleet Primary School will be a judge for the National Happiness Awards, which is now open for nominations.

McPartlin and his pupils melted hearts with their chaotic dance routine in last night's ITV final. He joins the National Happiness Awards after his school was crowned Happiest Primary School at last year's awards ceremony.

The National Happiness Awards identify and reward individuals, businesses and organisations which are improving lives with happiness. They recognise excellence in workplace wellbeing and positive mental health initiatives. Nominations are now invited from the business, charity and public sectors for the categories of Happiest Workplace, Happiest Employee and Happiest Team.

The influential awards have developed a reputation as the nation's brightest and boldest award scheme and consistently attract hundreds of nominations from some of the country's most forward-thinking organisations. Former winners include Bupa, Virgin Active and Burges Salmon.

Organisations are increasingly recognising the value of creating happy workplaces where employees are supported and developed. Research proves that happy employees are healthier, more engaged and more productive.

National Happiness Awards founder Stephanie Davies said: "Happiness is a vital element of any



people-focused organisation and in many ways, it is more important than financial benefits because it is sustainable, it improves mental health and wellbeing and it promotes long-term growth and development. Flakefleet Primary School is a shining example of how an organisation can use happiness to change lives and we are delighted to have Dave onboard as a judge."

The business awards Gold sponsor is Simply Better Events and the awards will raise money for Haven House Children's Hospice. Winners will be announced at a gala ceremony in November.

To submit a nomination, go to www.laughology.co.uk/happiness-awards

Drunk at work: the cost to the UK economy and how some companies are tackling the issue

New research has revealed that as many as 89,000 people may be turning up to work hungover or under the influence of alcohol every day, costing the economy up to £1.4 billion a year.

The survey of 3,400 workers for a report by the Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS), found 42% of workers had ever been to work hungover or intoxicated, and 9% had done so in the past six months.

The research also found that working hungover or intoxicated was most common in the hospitality and leisure, retail and construction sectors.

Higher earners were more likely to have gone to work hungover or under the influence; 29% of people earning under £10,000 a year had ever done so, compared to 55% of people earning over £60,000.

Respondents to the survey also reported being affected by others' drinking at work: 36% suspected that one or more of their colleagues had been hungover or intoxicated in the last six months, reporting reduced productivity, greater stress and a negative effect on team morale.

On average, respondents believed themselves to be 39% less effective when they were drunk

or hungover. Based on average labour costs, and how frequently people are impaired at work, this implies a cost to the UK economy of between £1.2 billion and £1.4 billion a year.

Suzannah Robin, an alcohol and drug safety expert at AlcoDigital, said:

"The findings from this study are not surprising. Over the last 15 years AlcoDigital have worked with many companies assisting them in managing the impact of alcohol in the workplace, helping them develop drug and alcohol policies to deal with the loss of productivity and safety issues arising from excessive alcohol consumption."

"While the report clearly demonstrates that daily testing dramatically reduces the number of employees at work while under the influence, historically testing on this scale has proven difficult and costly to implement due to the need for company personnel to undertake the screening process manually."

From July this year however, AlcoDigital have a



solution to this problem with WorkSober – an automated breathalyser with integrated facial recognition able to check each and every worker in a matter of seconds, prior to entry into the workplace, with no supervision required. While new to the UK, already over 180 companies worldwide have installed the system, with over 50,000 employees being checked on a daily basis.

“Daily testing benefits not only the company, but also improves the health of their workers by highlighting the dangers of excessive alcohol use” said Suzannah.

UK companies interested in trialling the new WorkSober system should contact AlcoDigital via their website - www.alcodigital.co.uk

Daily testing benefits not only the company, but also improves the health of their workers by highlighting the dangers of excessive alcohol use

Menopause discrimination is a real thing – this is how employers can help

For many women, going through the menopause can be a difficult time. It typically occurs for women between 45-55 years-old and lasts four to eight years. Most women experience some symptoms – the severity and duration of which can vary from woman to woman. The most common symptoms include hot flushes, headaches, problems with memory or concentration and mood changes.

Going through the menopause while working can be particularly tricky. Research shows two-thirds of women surveyed reported a moderate to severe impact on their working lives and some even left employment altogether. But women in this age group make up an increasing proportion of the UK's workforce. The employment rate for women over 50 is 67%, having increased from 58% in 2008.

Last year, Radio 4's Woman's Hour commissioned a poll that found 48% of women experiencing the menopause said it had "a negative impact on their mental health and mood". Similarly, our research with the police service in the UK has demonstrated how for many women the emotional symptoms experienced were often more problematic than physical symptoms.

Previous research has also shown that women view disclosure of menopausal status at work to be threatening and embarrassing, potentially exposing them to ridicule and hostility when discussed with managers.

Workplaces can often lack both the practical support and the empathy required to support

women going through the menopause. And given the fact that some women are actually leaving work during the menopause as they feel unable to cope, it is clear this needs to change.

Initiatives to support women going through the menopause are starting to emerge in some forward thinking organisations. And a small number of organisations have responded by introducing a formal policy to mandate action around the menopause transition. But more still needs to be done. So with this in mind, here's what needs to change to make working environment's better for women going through the menopause.

1. Talk about it

Current research with the police service suggests that most women want an open and trusting working environment where discussion of the menopause is possible and encouraged.

Information and training sessions for managers and employees are important to help create discussions and opening space for supportive conversations to take place. Awareness training can also help to drive cultural change. This allows



embedded practice to be more effectively challenged, especially in masculine workplace cultures.

2. Make simple changes

Many physical symptoms can be alleviated with relatively simple steps. Better ventilation or temperature control, access to toilets, cold water and a rest area – can all be fairly easy to arrange.

Where uniforms are worn, adjustments to accommodate primary menopause symptoms are important – by using, for example, natural rather than synthetic materials for women experiencing hot flushes. Discussions are again important to ensure that these adjustments do not mark out women wearing them as “different”.

3. Offer flexible working hours

Flexibility is important where the menopause symptoms are problematic. This could include a

move from full-time to part-time, or a more ad-hoc, working style. It could even be as simple as allowing for late arrivals where a woman has had disturbed sleep. Clearly this requires awareness on the part of managers and trusting relations between managers and staff.

It's clear that with a few simple changes and adjustments, many companies could make the menopause an easier time for women. But when women are left unsupported during the menopause, organisations risk losing experienced and capable members of staff.

There is a strong economic and social case for supporting older women to continue in paid employment. And with better support through this normal but often challenging stage in life, rather than leaving work, women going through the menopause could continue to offer many more years of service.

theconversation.com

Want to spend less at the supermarket? Put your phone away!

Using a mobile phone on a trip to the supermarket pushes up shopping bills by a hefty 41%, according to researchers from the University of Bath's School of Management.

When shoppers use their mobiles to keep up with texts, social media or calls they move around the store at a slower pace, wander along more aisles, and come across extra products.

Each second people spend on their phone equates to an estimated extra 20-40p at the checkout.

In the first of a two-part study the researchers found that people added 45% more products, and this rose to 58% in the second study.

The researchers say using a mobile distracts people from their planned shopping list, whether that's an actual itemised list or their autopilot shop - where people take a routine path through the supermarket picking up favourite items.

More items end up in the trolley because exposure to a greater array of products jogs people's memory about other things they have run out of at home; or because coming across and noticing new products inspires people to make extra purchases.

Even a small grocery store can stock 10,000 unique products, an impossible quantity for the human brain to process consciously. The researchers explain that one way our brains try to simplify this is to activate a kind of inner autopilot





which acts as a shopping script to what we do and see in the store. When we use our phone we interrupt our autopilot and we move and behave very differently.

The study of Swedish supermarkets, published in the *Journal of Marketing*, is based on a data set of 294 shopping trips collected by consultancy firm Retail Academics, and a follow up experiment by the Bath researchers of 120 shoppers, which replicated the shopping with and without mobile phones.

Using eye tracker technology the research team from Stockholm School of Economics, Babson College and the University of Tennessee studied how people moved about the store, what they looked at, and what they bought.

Dr Carl-Philip Ahlbom, Prize Fellow at Bath's School of Management, said: "Retailers have tended to worry that when shoppers use their mobiles it's distracting them from spending money, so we were amazed to find completely the reverse effect. The findings were very clear: the more time you spend on your phone, the more money you'll part with. So if you're trying to budget, leave your phone in your pocket! It's not the phone itself that causes more purchases, but

its impact on our focus.

"On the plus side, it isn't necessarily a bad thing for shoppers. Taking a slower and more scenic journey can remind you of products you'd forgotten you needed, and it can introduce you to items that might make for a more inspiring menu. Shoppers are very habitual creatures, most of us vary our purchases by less than 150 items a year, so maybe you can thank your mobile for freshening things up."

"For retailers there's a clear message here that they no longer need to fear mobile phone use in-store. In fact, making it easy for customers to use their mobiles, with good WiFi and enhancements like mobile phone docking stations on shopping trolleys, will more than pay off. The one exception is that using a mobile phone protects shoppers from temptation at the checkout. Here we found that people picked up fewer items than normal," added Professor Jens Nordfält."

The study was based in a supermarket setting but the researchers anticipate that the findings would hold out in other sectors, such as fast fashion, where shoppers are buying items with a low or moderate cost.

Hacks that will make office life much more bearable

Life happens, even at work. So try out these tips for dealing with spilled coffee, staying cool with a fan and more.

What should you do if you spill coffee on your keyboard? How can you make your cubicle feel more like a sanctuary and less like a prison cell? What should you do when you're feeling tired, antsy or in need of a refresh?

When you're in the workplace, you might not have access to all of the creature comforts and cleaning supplies you would at home, but that doesn't mean you should feel uncomfortable or unprepared when life takes its toll.

You're also probably (hopefully, for your colleagues' sake) aware of how your behaviour comes across at work: you don't want to subject anyone to the breeze of your desk fan, the unwieldy vines of your desk plant that's growing like a weed or your panic when you realise you might have fried your hard drive.

To set yourself up for success at work beyond your typical negotiation strategies and email etiquette, read on for office hacks that will make your days go smoothly.

Save your keyboard from a coffee spill.

We've all been there. You're being very careful, drinking coffee or another acidic or sugary beverage while working on your computer. Then, before you know what's happening, bam. Your keyboard is flooded.



Don't panic in this scenario. Instead, your first step should be to turn off your computer and unplug it from any power sources or external hard drives. Take out the device's battery, if your computer is designed to allow this.

Ignore the instinct to wipe down your laptop and, instead, blot the spill with a clean towel. If you use a wiping motion, you might push the liquid further into the machine.

If you're able to, turn the laptop upside down and leave it off to allow as much of the liquid to drain out as possible. If a ton of liquid (something other than water) has spilled onto it, and you're able to take it in to a repair shop right then, do so. Luckily, this sort of hazard is preventable: use a

plastic keyboard cover, or drink from a mug with a lid that locks.

Keep your laptop clean in general.

Even if it doesn't bother you that your laptop is a bit grimy, leaving fingerprints, coffee splash stains and other residue on your screen, keyboard and trackpad is arguably not the most professional way to present yourself.

You don't need to schlep to an office supply store or shell out for a fancy cleaning solution kit to get your machine looking sparkly. The four essentials for keeping a pristine computer are rubbing alcohol (90 percent isopropyl or higher), microfiber cloths, cotton swabs and canned air.

The canned air is designed to blast crumbs, pet hair and other debris out of the crevices of your machine, including under the keys. Start there.

If your laptop is one of the models that its manufacturer has designed to be taken apart, once you've turned it off, unplugged it and taken out its battery, you can use canned air on the inside hardware, too. Why clean the inside? Because buildup of any kind can make your computer more susceptible to overheating.

First, do a test spray away from your laptop to clear the nozzle, then go to town on the headphone jack, keyboard -- anywhere some gross particles could have found their way in. Spray in short bursts to prevent condensation buildup.

Then, wipe whatever the air spray has unearthed from your computer's exterior. For this phase of the cleaning process, use only water on the screen, but you can use the alcohol on less sensitive areas (but apply it to the cotton swabs, not the machine directly).

Use your fan correctly.

If you work in a sweltering office, it can be difficult to keep your cool. Rather than passively-aggressively fanning yourself with a stack of papers whenever your always-cold co-worker walks by wearing her cardigan and scarf, figure

out how to best position a personal fan to cool your workspace.

There are a couple of factors to keep in mind about the physics of fans before you plug yours in. If your immediate workspace is hot but near a cooler area such as a hallway, it might be wise to position the fan away from you, so the fan sucks the hotter area into the cooler vicinity. But the more effective solution, if it's somehow cooler outside than inside, would be to prop the fan in the window, blowing into the room.

If it's hotter outside than inside, make sure the fan is blowing directly onto you. The fan itself will not cool down the room -- the entire point is to move the air against the perspiration that's on your body.

Rest your eyes.

Even those of us who complain of having to stare at a computer screen all day don't always take the necessary precautions to minimise eye strain.

First, make a point of looking away from the screen at regular intervals. One widely accepted, easy-to-remember strategy is, every 20 minutes, look at an object at least 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. This is known as the 20-20-20 rule.

If you're able to shift the angle of your computer screen or monitor so overhead lights don't create painful glare, do so. Another option is to download an add-on such as Flux, which will filter out some of the blue light from your display, leaving your screen looking yellowish. You can use this setting round the clock, but its developers otherwise program it to kick in around sunset. A less blue and dimmer screen is easier on the eyes, and it's designed to help you sleep better at night.

For Mac users, Apple released a similar tool within its software in early 2017, called Night Shift. The support page for the feature states, "Studies have shown that exposure to bright blue light in the evening can affect your circadian rhythms and make it harder to fall asleep."

Continued ►

Let the light in.

You may not want your colleagues to think you're vain, but consider putting a mirror at your desk if you want more natural light in your space. If there are some windows nearby, and the overhead light isn't too overpowering, experiment with a mirror or two, placing them at different angles until you've created the illusion that your desk area is more illuminated (and perhaps even seemingly more spacious).

Another perk of a mirror is that it might help you see who's walking behind you, so no one startles you when they're trying to get your attention and you're wearing headphones. However, note that seeing a great deal of movement outside of your peripheral vision might prove distracting.

Another option for those whose workspaces are far from a window is a natural light bulb, or a therapy lamp designed to combat seasonal affective disorder. The latter sometimes can help treat people with sleep disorders, some forms of depression and jet lag as well.

Fidget more mindfully.

Maybe you bite your fingernails, tap them on the desk, click your pen or even mindlessly doodle throughout the workday. These habits are not necessarily ones you should try to suppress. The instinct to fidget is completely normal, and it actually helps you work better.

Researchers at New York University's Polytechnic School of Engineering's Game Innovation



Lab explain that the "interrelation of bodily movement, cognition and emotional state has been amply demonstrated, and manipulating physical objects with the hand is known to activate the brain in measurable ways."

So, who says fidget spinners are just for kids? There are a number of objects you can use to keep your hands busy that are ergonomically designed for this purpose, from fidget cubes to squeezable stress balls. The latter may even relax you.

Add a plant.

Research shows that indoor plants improve people's moods, productivity and creativity and minimise the number of sick days they take from work.

If you're looking to greenify your workspace, add a plant or two to your desk area, being mindful of company policy, as well as any nearby colleagues' preferences and allergies.

Some low-maintenance plants include Sansevieria, Aglaonema, Pothos, Philodendrons and Zamioculcas zamiifolia (ZZ Plants). If you have no windows near you, the aforementioned

species are also good options, or you could try *Spathiphyllum* plants.

Know what to do if a colleague needs emotional support.

At work, we have to look out for our own best interests, complete our tasks and keep things work appropriate. But sometimes, a colleague will need a shoulder to cry on or a sounding board for their frustrations or will be going through a difficult time at home.

If someone is on the verge of tears, don't tell them not to cry. Such emotions are natural, and the last thing you want to do is make them feel guilty for their feelings. Instead, wrap up the conversation and allow them to let their tears run their course privately. If you're a manager and you've made someone cry (but not full-on sob), don't touch them to comfort them. Just tell them you want to understand. Say something like, "You're clearly upset, though I'm not sure I understand why. Know that you can tell me, and I want to help."

When someone is full-on sobbing, your first move should be to preserve their dignity by shutting the door or quietly ushering them to a more private place. Another dilemma might be when you know someone you work with is going through a personal crisis. In these cases, don't try to do too much. Don't demand information by asking 'How are you doing?' or 'What can I do?'

A post Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg shared shortly after her husband died drives this point home: "Real empathy is sometimes not insisting that it will be okay but acknowledging that it is not."

The best things you can say are, "I heard what happened" and "I can't imagine what it's like for you." From there, your colleague can decide how they'd like to open up to you, and you haven't demanded that they engage with you about what's going on, nor have you tried to mediate their emotions.



Wake yourself up.

Some days, you wake up groggy, but you're still forced to drag yourself to the office or log on to complete the day's tasks. Before you mainline some coffee, try these strategies to feel more energetic throughout the day.

First, splash cold water on your face to give yourself a jolt of energy. This might involve taking a cold shower before you leave home. (Research has shown that people who take cold showers take fewer sick days, too.) If you're pressed for time, drinking a glass of cold water could have a similar effect.

Various research has shown that timing your coffee correctly can also help maximise your alertness. The key is to drink coffee when your cortisol levels are at their lowest. People commonly refer to cortisol as the "stress hormone" – it's a chemical compound that boosts your energy. For the average person, cortisol levels spike between 8 and 9 a.m..

Avoid adding caffeine to the mix during that peak cortisol time – you're better off boosting your alertness levels once the cortisol peak is over, to avoid becoming jittery. So, save the coffee until the 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. window -- or about three to five hours after wake-up.

www.entrepreneur.com

Face the fear of career change when you're over 40

Maybe you're no longer happy on your current path. Maybe you're feeling drawn to something new and different. Whatever the reason, you're thinking about changing careers. The thing is, you're years (or decades!) into your career, having spent most of your 20s, 30s and 40s getting to this point.

So a complete change seems pretty scary, if not damn near impossible. These thoughts may sound familiar:

I'll never make enough money!

What if I'm terrible at it?

No one will want to hire someone my age.

It's just too late for me.

You're not the first wannabe career changer to feel this way. But you don't have to let those doubts and worries hold you back. Career changers who made moves after 40 explain how they overcame common fears and made successful pivots.

I Can't Leave Something I Know and Have Worked So Hard For

It's not just the quitting part that's scary – people leave jobs all the time. It's the idea of leaving behind something that's (maybe) safe and reliable, and something that you've spent what feels like forever building and refining and perfecting.

Guy Parker, a 53-year old vendor manager at Opendoor who worked as a police officer for years before changing careers, had this exact fear. Even though he would come home every day knowing that his job wasn't the right fit anymore and asking his wife if he should quit, actually taking that step didn't happen for some time.

"I had invested 16 years of my life" in his career as a police officer, he explains. "It took a few years before I gathered the courage to make the change."

Michele Westfahl, a registered nurse for over 15 years turned recruiter at Aurora Health Care, found the transition from a patient-focused role to a desk job daunting. "The biggest hurdle was leaving something you know that you've become an expert at to be new at something again," she admits.

Face the Fear

Here's the thing: Changing careers requires letting go of what you have in order to make space for what's to come. It also requires you to redefine your identity in the professional world. That's of course terrifying, and can often make you feel like you're taking a step back or putting to waste years of effort and skill building.

But the alternative option – staying put – isn't all that warm and fuzzy, either. For Parker, not making the switch meant continuing to be miserable at work. Westfahl, on the other hand, felt limited where she was: "I constantly saw friends that I would work with in the emergency department having growth opportunities, whether it be in leadership or going back to school and doing advanced practice degrees, but never really felt like that was my path," she explains. "I grew as far as I could in my



department, and accomplished all the things that I could accomplish there.”

I'll Have to Start From Scratch

There's no denying that trying to switch to a very different job or field comes with a steep learning curve.

Jed Lewin, a licensed associate real estate broker at Triplemint, knew he'd have a lot of catching up to do to break into real estate after being a lawyer for 15 years. There would be new technology to learn, new industry requirements to become familiar with, a new network to build up, and a new way of doing business to adjust to.

Despite being great with people after years of working as a bedside nurse, Westfahl was also pretty intimidated by the other requirements set before her in becoming a recruiter. “I don't lead meetings or do PowerPoint presentations or write job proposals,” she remembers thinking to herself at the time. “And those were all expectations of a new career in the business world.”

Face the Fear

Certainly not everything you've built up until now will apply to your new career. The

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responsibilities of a lawyer and a broker, or a nurse and a recruiter, for example, are incredibly different. But a lot of your experience and skill set can be surprisingly relevant, even if the jobs themselves don't seem anything alike.

Lewin believes that his transition wouldn't have been possible without heavily leaning on the skills he'd built in his legal career – including being a good negotiator, managing client relationships, and understanding contracts. He also capitalized on his previous professional relationships to grow his customer base and network.

Westfahl found that the years she'd spent building relationships with patients, communicating with staff, and being immersed in the healthcare space appealed to her hiring team. "Because I've been in the industry [so] long, I've been exposed to so many different areas of the hospital where I can truly connect with different nurses about the types of environments that they're looking at."

But if you feel like you're lacking in the transferable skills department, there are tons of options nowadays for getting up to speed in a new field, from online courses to classroom training to returnships – all of which can give you the confidence and resume boost you need to move forward.

No One's Going to Want to Hire Someone My Age

OK, let's say you know what you bring to the table – transferable skills and all – but you're worried others won't. More importantly, you're scared that your age will make addressing this all the more difficult.

I won't deny it – ageism exists in the workplace and in the job search, despite the fact that it's illegal. "Within the western culture, we tend to equate vitality with youth," says Muse career coach Jenny Foss, who frequently works with older job seekers. Older employees may get unfairly stereotyped as having low energy, being stuck in their ways, or not being "with it"

when it comes to the latest technology. As a result, job seekers find themselves passed over for roles or worrying about finding a new job because of their age.

Face the Fear

Sadly, you can't single-handedly defeat the cultural problem of age discrimination. But being strategic about how you sell yourself as a career changer can help you combat it in your own job search.

Figuring out your transferable skills is one part of the equation, for sure. But also think about all the experience you have as being incredibly valuable – even if it's not obviously relevant.

Westfahl believes that her tenure and track record allowed her to bridge the gap between nursing and recruiting, even in the spots where her skills couldn't. "Being honest and letting [the hiring managers] know that I'm a quick learner and I'm extremely dedicated helped," she says. "and they could see that – I was in my same department for 16 years, [and a] very loyal employee."

Hiring managers mostly want someone who can do the work and do it well, so the most important thing you can focus on is how you highlight your skills to match this new role – and how you prove that your not-so-linear career trajectory puts you at a distinct advantage over someone younger or on a more straightforward path.

And be honest with yourself: Who's writing the narrative, the job market...or you? As Foss points out, it's all too easy to tell yourself that age discrimination will make it impossible for you to move forward, rather than putting in the work to update your skills or elevator pitch – making it a self-fulfilling prophecy. "You decide you're stuck, you stay stuck," she explains.

I Can't Afford to Make a Change

When you've achieved a certain level in your career, a career change isn't just about giving up your vision of yourself as a professional – it

can often mean giving up a sizeable paycheck, too. And at this age, that sacrifice may affect more than just you. Maybe you have a family to support, a mortgage to pay off, or other life obligations that require you to bring in a steady income.

Face the Fear

Having a plan in place can help combat the fear of running dry financially. How long do you want to give this new career a shot? What's your metric for deciding whether or not you're successful in this new career? Where will you go if things don't pan out? Can you afford to not work, and for how long? These are all questions you should have answers to before taking the leap.

"I was very lucky. I was 41 when I made the switch. My wife was working for a big law firm and we had benefits through her employer," says Lewin. With the safety net of insurance coverage and some money saved up, he figured he had six months to give being a broker a shot. "Even if I'm a total failure, we're still going to eat," he thought to himself.

"But I gave myself a time [limit]," he adds. "I didn't want to go into debt to do this." He decided that if he didn't close a single deal in that six-month period, it wasn't meant to be. Fortunately, he achieved what he set out to do.

For extra financial security, you may choose to keep one foot in your old career for a while – say, doing contract work in marketing while you try to land a sales job. That being said, don't rely so heavily on your backup plan that you avoid giving your career change your all. Big changes like this take time, so you have to be patient and understand that you may need several months to get yourself in the groove.

"I was getting approached by recruiters all the time to take similar types of jobs – relationship manager jobs, assistant general counsel jobs, attorney jobs," says Lewin. "But that wasn't where my passion was anymore. I knew it would be a

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good paycheck, I knew it would be safe, and I knew it would be fine, but I wanted to live a life that I was designing... My wife and I both believed that it was worth taking the risk to find something that I could truly be passionate about."

What if I Regret It?

It's pretty common to worry about making the wrong career leap. What if you realise you've gone down a path even worse than the one you were on previously? What if you miss your old job and are unable to turn back around? What if you get halfway down the road only to discover you actually want to take a totally different route? Fear of making the wrong move can easily paralyze you from making any move.

Face the Fear

You're inevitably going to make mistakes in your career – and you may even make a mistake in choosing your new path. But that certainly doesn't mean that's the end of the road for you.

Kelli Smith struggled to figure out exactly where she wanted to go at 44 after working for several years in cargo logistics, then as an English teacher and freelance corporate trainer abroad. She decided she had a passion for tech and took a web development course on Skillcrush, thinking she wanted to become a developer. However, she quickly learned that wasn't what she actually wanted to do. She found herself back at square one, feeling defeated that she'd misstepped.

But her "mistake" proved to be a very smart move. Smith kept in contact with her Skillcrush instructors. "And at one point when I was talking to them, they said, 'Don't you have a customer support background from your logistics company? And I said, 'Yeah, that's the part of the company I pretty much ran,'" she recalls.

She landed a job at Skillcrush as the head of customer support, and from there went on to become an operations manager. While she didn't end up using the skills from her web development training, "the fact that I was willing

to learn those opened those doors that got me to where I am," she says.

You also have to remember that you won't know whether it's the right decision for you for some time. "If it's blaringly obvious that it was the wrong decision, it might be best to course correct sooner rather than later, sure. But I've also seen people fail solely because they didn't give something new enough time to 'stick,'" explains Foss. "Most new things will feel uncomfortable or challenge you in ways that you're not used to being challenged... And that's totally normal, and will absolutely be a part of the journey into a new job or career, at any age."

What if I'm Terrible at It?

It's one thing to worry about not liking a new career. It's terrifying to think that you might go after a job you want so badly, only to get it and realise you're not even any good at it. Or that you can't seem to fit into the new culture. Or that you're always way behind your peers, despite your age and expertise.

Face the Fear

The truth is, you're going to feel out of your element when you first make the switch.

"Just learning the way [my colleagues] speak and the types of things they want to hear was like being in a foreign country," says Westfahl about having to attend meetings after working in a hospital for years. When Lewin started working in sales, he says, "I didn't understand the jargon and I was scared that I was going to be trying to support a family doing something I'd never done before." He adds that as a lawyer, "No matter how well or how poorly I performed in a given week, I was getting a paycheck. In real estate, that is not the case."

But they gave themselves time to adjust without judgement, knowing that they were hard workers and dedicated learners.

"It's scary to be new at something," Westfahl admits. "I really like to know my craft and be good



at it and not make any mistakes." She says that for the first few months, she just observed others. "Then it came full circle after a year, where now I'm very confident in meetings," she explains. "I was a very reserved, shy person. And now I'm a totally different person, and I love that."

There's no doubt you'll struggle and mess up in those first few months of your new career. But remind yourself that while there's a lot you don't know – about the culture, about your role responsibilities, about industry lingo – there's a lot you do know, as someone with years of experience in the workplace.

Lewin points out, "Every relationship I've ever built, every friendship and personal and professional connection I've ever made has been selling myself to someone else and having them buy it. And that's what I do in real estate. I don't sell apartments. I sell my knowledge, my expertise, and my help."

He adds, "Believe that the skills and knowledge [and] experience you've built over the course of your career to this point has value and merit." With this mindset, the adjustment period won't seem so intimidating.

Pushing past your fears is hard, but it's well worth it, all of these career changers say. In fact, making the switch gave each of them some sense of invincibility, in a way that's both admirable and inspiring for anyone at any stage in their professional development. "If I did it in my mid-40s, I feel like anybody can do it," Smith says about her pivot.

Westfahl adds, "I tested myself, I took a leap of faith, and it worked out. Now I would not be scared if I saw something where I could build my career even further. I would feel more confident going into it than I ever have before, only because I did something that was so drastic."

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