

WORK & FAMILY

Your Expense Report Is a Window Into Your Soul

How you handle the costs you run up on company time can hint at whether your job is making you happy, or even your sense of ethics and fairness

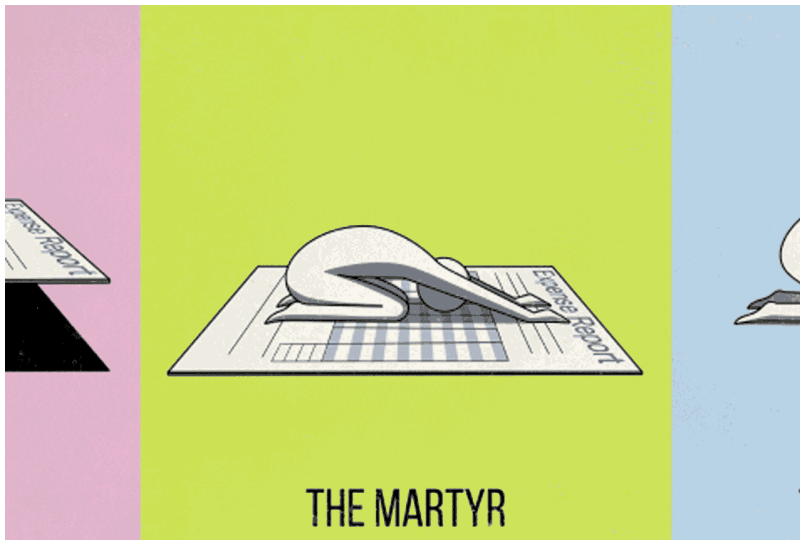


ILLUSTRATION: JON KRAUSE

By Sue Shellenbarger

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What does your expense report say about you?

Filing business-expense reports is a slam dunk for road warriors who submit them often, or have assistants to do it for them. But for the rest of us—the majority of filers who submit expense claims only a few times a year—the task can be one of the worst parts of a job.

How people handle expense reports reveals a lot about their attitudes toward their employer, and their emotional baggage about money. Based on corporate research and insights from psychologists, here are a few common expense-reporting profiles:

The Sidestepper

Some people find completing expense reports too confusing, tedious or anxiety-provoking to bear. About 10% of employees don't file for reimbursement even when they're entitled to it, according to a 2018 survey of British workers by Allstar Business Solutions, an English credit-card company. Some resent the time required to scan receipts, list contacts and itemize fees and taxes.

Others fear awkward conversations with managers who ask, "Why did you expense that coffee for \$1.50?" says Tim Hird, an executive vice president with the staffing firm Robert Half.

Managing financial details makes some people so anxious or impatient that they'd rather give up the money, says Kate Levinson, author of "Emotional Currency," a book about the feelings aroused by money issues. Some sidesteppers feel so guilty that they hide their expense-reporting lapses from their spouses, she says.

The Martyr

This employee is so inspired by his employer's mission that he treats his company like a charity. He may not file for reimbursement at all, paying expenses as a way of supporting the company, says Liz Fosslien, co-author of "No Hard Feelings," a book about embracing emotion at work. She's seen that pattern among employees of Silicon Valley startups and tech companies.

On the flip side, others' lavish spending can show they're mainly out for themselves, Ms. Fosslien says. A senior executive at a company where she once worked gained a reputation shortly after being hired for lavish dinners and expensive flights. "He was just wildly overspending. It sent a strong signal to others that he wasn't there for the right reasons," Ms. Fosslien says. The executive soon left the company by mutual agreement, she says.

Readers Weigh In

How do you handle expense reports?

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"Only one tried-and-true method for the thousands of expense reports I file each year. Picture a corporate finance person sitting across from you with a printed copy of the receipt, asking about the expense. If you feel embarrassed or guilty in this hypothetical scenario, it's not a good

The Payback Artist

Keenly conscious of fairness, these employees see money as an instrument of power. They may have been raised in a household where cash was used to control family members, leading them to pay close attention to expenses, Dr. Levinson says.

Those who feel undervalued—believing that they're paid too little or the CEO's eight-figure paycheck is too high—are likely to file for every dime spent, Dr. Levinson says. "This is an easy way to express that resentment without losing your job," she says.

They're also likely to go out and say, "Let's expense this! This round of drinks is on the company," Ms. Fosslien says. "They're thinking, 'I deserve better and I'm going to get it.' "

Others' expense reports scream of alienation. Eileen Timmins, a Chicago human-resources executive, recalls an incident at a previous employer. One employee was upset when her employer refused to reimburse her for a \$150 basket of fruit and cheese she'd bought as a gift for a conference sponsor. The employee's response: "All right, I know how to work the system," Ms. Timmins says. She began aggressively filing for every allowable outlay, regardless of how small.

The Rookie

It's common for employees in their 20s and 30s not to have read their employers' expense policy. But they often worry about getting in trouble for overspending, according to research by SAP Concur, an expense, travel and invoice management company. Decisions that are obvious to senior colleagues cause them considerable angst. "They don't know what's normal," says Mike Volpe, chief executive of Lola.com, a corporate travel-management platform.

Employers often tell employees to spend the company's money as if it were their own. Young workers may think that means sharing a hotel room with a co-worker or booking the cheapest flight regardless of time wasted on layovers, says Steve Isom, vice president of finance at Flywheel, a company that helps clients build and manage websites.

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Others err in the opposite direction. When Brett Hicks mentioned the guideline to a former colleague with a habit of ordering expensive business meals and multiple cocktails, he replied, "I am spending the company's money the way I'd spend my own," says Ms. Hicks, training and development manager at Flywheel in Omaha, Neb.

Decisions made under stress are especially difficult. Product manager Jack Sellwood, also of Omaha, was tired after working several days at a conference in Berlin, his first international business trip. Told by a colleague at the airport that employees were expected to show up at the office the following day, he decided at the last

minute to upgrade his ticket to business class so he could get some sleep.

His employer didn't agree, and docked his next paycheck to cover the added cost, he says. Still, the sleep was worth it, Mr. Sellwood says. "I'd do it again."

The Grifter

Fueled by a sense of entitlement, this employee pushes reimbursement requests to the limit—and beyond. Some 56% of CFOs have seen a rise in questionable expense filings in the past three years, according to a recent survey of 1,000 CFOs by Robert Half. Questionable items ranged from pet-sitting and bedbug removal to a pogo stick and a string of pearls. Such items suggest employees know they can push their companies' boundaries, Mr. Hird says.

While reckless spenders are often fired, rainmakers sometimes get away with it. Jack McCullough tells of a sales vice president at a former employer who regularly asked to be reimbursed for three meals a day, five days a week, all costing just under \$25—the threshold at which the company required receipts. “When I implied he might be stretching the rules, he went ballistic on me,” says Mr. McCullough, president of the CFO Leadership Council, a professional group.

Mr. McCullough, who works in North Andover, Mass., lowered the receipt threshold to \$15 in an attempt to block the maneuver, but the salesman reduced his reported per-meal expense to \$14.99 or less. Mr. McCullough took the issue to the man's boss. “He said, ‘I know this salesman is a crook, but we make more money letting him steal from us than we would from somebody who is honest,’ ” Mr. McCullough says. Lacking other options, they let the issue go.

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