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Humorous kit can help make life in cubicle more bearable



By SHARON LINSTEDT
5/27/2002

When Rob W. gets up from his desk to stretch and clear his head, the view in every direction is exactly the same - a blue gray sea of office cubicles.

While the odd potted plant or knickknack breaks up the pure geometry of the room, Rob's work world is framed by a giant grid of 6-by-8 foot rectangles, with a handful of larger 8-by-10 foot blocks at the outside corners.

"It's kind of like a big crossword puzzle and I'm five down and four across," said Rob, who has spent the past three years in similar "cubes" at an Amherst call center.

"I've got more space now than when I started, but still no door, no window and no privacy," he said.

Renee D., a Buffalo insurance company employee, spends her days in similar surroundings. The veteran office manager abandoned her dream of "four real walls" years ago and has grown comfortable with her "office."

A raft of family photos and artwork from her young grandchildren fills the space between stacks of files and folders. And a small green teddy bear with a shamrock bow tie is perched next to her telephone.

"It feels like my space. I have it decorated with things from my life the way I would do up a full-size office," Renee said.

Rob and Renee are among the vast majority of U.S. white-collar workers who spend their working hours in a cubicle. It's estimated that 40 million employees, a full 60 percent of American workers, report daily to the ubiquitous grid. Orders are taken, numbers are crunched and careers are built inside millions of small, partitioned pens that have become the industry standard of nearly every industry.

Blame it all on Herman Miller if the cubicle life doesn't suit you. In the late 1950s, the metal desk maker developed the first framework wall system, the "Action Office," marketing it as a way to provide tailor-made office space to suit the needs of its human occupant.

By the 1970s, cubicles had become the modern work venue of choice as employers looked for ways to create flexible, affordable office space to house the burgeoning white-collar work force.

When the dot-com boom of the 1990s struck, the endlessly-configurable cubicle gained



favor for the chief executive, as well as the rank -and-file, serving as a badge of the egalitarian workplace, while allowing for ever-changing employee rosters.

Charlene J., a Buffalo medical claims processor, said there are pros and cons to being a cubicle dweller. And both have to do with the people who work around you.

"My best friend worked right next to me for two years and that was just great. If I wanted some company, I could just stand up and we could talk for a couple of minutes," Charlene said.

But when her pal was moved to another division, the worker who took over the neighboring cube made life difficult.

"He talks too loud and has a really annoying laugh. He sounds like an animal, a donkey or something," she complained. "He's also nosey. A couple times a day he'll just pop his head up over the wall and start jabbering."

To make life in cubicle-land a bit more bearable, Chris Ryan (aka: The Cube Guy) has created the "Cubicle Survival Kit." The humorous, yet practical kit includes items to help cube workers deal with everything from Mr. Loud Mouth to Ms. Way -Too-Much-Perfume.

The \$24.95 package of work aids includes a fan, ear plugs, a wide-angle rear view mirror, a faux window poster, and a hand-held "I'm Busy" sign to wave off unwanted visitors. A \$59.99 version adds a white noise machine to the mix.

"Many people, myself included, find (working in a cubicle) a frustrating experience in many ways," Ryan said. "This kit was designed to reduce many of the inconveniences associated with cube existence such as distracting noises and rude behavior."

The kits can be ordered through Ryan's Web site: www.cubeguy.com. The site also offers bits of humor and advice for coping with cubicles.

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