



October 9, 2002

CUBICLE CULTURE

By SUEIN HWANG

Employees Test Defenses Against the Office Pest

It's impossible to avoid them: those well-meaning colleagues who lean over your cubicle wall and chat endlessly. They never take a hint, no matter how busy you look. For the modular masses, invading one another's cubicle space seems to be an inalienable right. Privacy is not.

Advocates of the open-plan office say it fosters communication and collegiality. In reality, open-plan offices, with their three-walled cubicles, tend to foster nosiness by their very design, emboldening co-workers to eavesdrop, intrude and interrupt in ways unimaginable.

But one person's nuisance is another person's inspiration. More than a few entrepreneurs have figured out that there is money to be made in helping employees regain control of their work environment. Faux cubicle doors, high-tech mirrors and other do-dads all promise some degree of privacy.

Ai Architects, based in Washington, sells stacks of soft blocks in different shapes and colors called Protoblocs, which can be piled alongside cubicles to form barriers. By rearranging the blocks, workers can communicate to colleagues when it's cool to stop by (a green pyramid), and when to scram (a red square).

In 1999, Ai gave 300 workers at mortgage lender Freddie Mac some Protoblocs to test. Three years later, the soft colorful blocks are still around, but many workers have long grown immune to even a glaring red square. "If we need to speak to somebody, we disregard all signals," explains Eileen Moran, a graphics designer at Freddie Mac. "We just interrupt and go straight to the source."

Ai's Rusty Meadows, the blocks' co-designer, concedes that Protobloc compliance is far from perfect. "Some people respected the system, some didn't," he says. "But when we asked people if they were willing to give them up the answer was 'absolutely not.' Even if it works only on some people part of the time, it saves an incredible amount of time and disruption."

Mr. Meadows says Ai has sold 15,000 sets of blocks (\$14.95 for one; \$10 in bulk) through its Web site so far, and orders are triple what they were a year earlier.

Some workers have gone a step further. Since 1996, thousands of cube dwellers have shelled out \$20 for Cube-a-Door, made by Flexible Designs of Denver, Colo. It's a five-foot-tall cardboard panel that folds like an accordion and is emblazoned with the phrase "Please Do Not Disturb" in four languages. It's meant to be a fourth wall, enclosing the occupant inside a small fortress.

The barrier works – sometimes. "Some people just hang their head over the top," sighs Sandra Stierwalt, an administrative assistant at Raytheon who has one. " 'Do Not Disturb' does not apply to everyone."

In the couple of years since she bought her Cube-a-Door, Ms. Stierwalt has found compliance has less to do with the panel than what colleagues believe is going on behind it. They steer clear if they think the person is working on something important. They barge in if they don't. When unsure, they peek over the top.

Privacy accessories are also subject to the law of diminishing returns. "The more they see it the more likely they are to ignore it," Ms. Stierwalt warns. She says she uses her door "judiciously," unfolding it and closing herself in only twice a week.

Cube-a-Door users say the door is virtually worthless when it comes to bosses. At StorageTek, based in Louisville, Colo., Web manager Shawn Fitzgerald recalls a time when a friend, exhausted from long nights working, put up his Cube-a-Door to take a nap,

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only to be awakened by his boss peeking over the top.

"Stronger language would definitely set a firmer boundary," Mr. Fitzgerald muses. "Maybe I need to upgrade."

Craig Dinan, a financial-services consultant and the entrepreneur behind Cube-a-Door, says he briefly toyed with selling a version imprinted with the words "p – off," but changed his mind after getting some negative feedback. He is, however, considering marketing a cubicle roof to resolve the peeking problem.

Plenty of other entrepreneurs have also discovered the cubicle privacy market. 3M makes a "privacy filter" that prevents nosy bystanders from seeing what's on your computer screen. In a recent Harris Poll commissioned by the company, 34% Americans admitted to sneaking peeks over colleagues' shoulders.

Lawyer and former dot-commer Chris Ryan is peddling a \$19.99 Cubicle Survival Kit that includes ear plugs, a rear-view mirror, a fake window and cardboard signs that say "I'll Stop By" on one side and "Come Back Later" on the other. (The deluxe version, for \$69.99, also includes a white noise machine.)

In my tests, I found the kit useful, but only to a point. The earplugs allowed me to ignore colleagues only until they stuck their hand in my cubicle and tapped me on the shoulder. Monitoring the rear-view mirror to see who was approaching was even more distracting than talking to a colleague.

The bottom line is, there are many ways to send colleagues a message that you want your privacy. Whether they will listen is another question.

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Updated October 9, 2002