# CUBES

## by Anna Rogers



**Dilbert:** "Why do I have a feeling of impending doom?"
**Pointy-Haired Boss:** "Good news!"
**Dilbert:** "Uh-oh."
**Pointy-Haired Boss:** "You won't have to spend another lonely day in this tiny cubicle!"
**Dilbert:** "I'm getting an office?"
**Pointy-Haired Boss:** "Better! You're getting a roommate!"

Scott Adams' clever jabs at cubicles through the life of his beloved, micro-managed character, Dilbert, are a familiar sentiment. In fact, the subject of "cubes" has provided plenty of amusing material to comedians, writers and co-workers alike.

Whether sharing a cube aisle with someone like Dwight Schrute or leaving work feeling a little too much like Peter Gibbons in Office Space, ignored by others and frustrated by a mundane work environment, the downfalls of a cubed-off office hit close to home for many.

Yet despite the stigma surrounding office cubicles, they are still being used today. Are cubes a dying breed, soon to be replaced by open, shared work space? Or is there still a place for cubicles in the modern office after all?

### The Birth of the Modern Workplace

Before the nineteenth century, most companies were small enough to utilize a shared workplace for all workers. Offices were usually intimate spaces, where the work of one was the business of everyone else. The hierarchy that existed in rank was not reflected in desk location. Nikil Saval puts it like this, in his book Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace: "the distance between junior clerk and partner was seen as both enormous and easily surmountable."

**OFFICE DESIGN EXPERTS ARE NOW SAYING THAT THE IDEAL OFFICE UTILIZES A BALANCED DESIGN WITH DESIGNATED COMMUNAL SPACES FOR CREATIVE TEAM MEETINGS AND PROJECT DEVELOPMENT, COMPLEMENTED BY SPACES WHERE THE EMPLOYEES CAN RETREAT AFTER THE GROUP GATHERING AND FOCUS ON THE WORK AT HAND.**

But with growth came more employees, leading to limited space and limited real estate. Development was directed upward – from filing cabinets to skyscrapers – and the need for organization within these offices became paramount for efficiency. It was Frederick Taylor, an engineer and management consultant, who first had the idea for cubicles. Rows of repetitive walled work boxes brought structure into large areas that housed mid-level employees, with personal offices being reserved for top management.

But today, the pace of change within a company's structure is moving faster than ever before. Workers are changing jobs more frequently, new positions are created quickly to meet demands, and technology is driving innovation at a rapid rate. With today's corporate ladder now more fluid and flexible than ever before, we have seen a shift and movement back to the shared work space environments of the pre-nineteenth century.

This open-office trend, hailed by many as progressive, is not without its pitfalls. Washington Post writer Lindsey Kaufman describes her own experience in a shared space environment in her article "Google got it wrong. The open-office trend is destroying the workplace." "Our new, modern Tribeca office was beautifully airy, and yet remarkably oppressive. Nothing was private… All day, there was constant shuffling, yelling, and laughing, along with loud music piped through a PA system." Kaufman's complaints echo what many researchers are finding. Employees who work in these open-plan offices see their work environments as negative. In fact, according to the findings of Dr. Vinesh Oommen in Asia Pacific Journal of Health Management (2008), 90% feel that this environment is "causing high levels of stress, conflict, high blood pressure, and a high staff turnover."

## A Barrier to Benefit

Some researchers are now suggesting that cubicles, despite their bad rap, may not be as undesirable as once thought. In fact, cubicles can increase individual well-being and productivity.

While the barrier that a cube wall creates can discourage idea sharing and communication among employees, it also creates a sound and sight barrier that shelters the employee from the distraction of unrelated conversations and gives the privacy required for phone calls, thinking, analysis, and meeting deadlines.

In addition, an employee with a defined, reliable space to work, who has their resources in a familiar, accessible place, will often be more productive than an employee whose work space for the day is unpredictable or shared.

Office design experts are now saying that the ideal office utilizes a balanced design with designated communal spaces for creative team meetings and project development, complemented by spaces where the employees can retreat after the group gathering and focus on the work at hand. Understanding how to create this perfect synergy in an office structure depends on your office culture.

In their article, "Who Moved My Cube" (Harvard Business Review, July 2011), Anne-Laure Fayard and John Weeks detail their study of a balance of three dimensions of office design: proximity, privacy and permission. "The most effective spaces bring people together and remove barriers while also providing sufficient privacy that people don't fear being overheard or interrupted. In addition, they reinforce permission to convene and speak freely."

## Fostering Community

To balance productivity and teamwork, employees should seek to foster a spirit of community by getting in face time with co-workers each day. Setting aside time to stand up, stretch a little and walk to someone else's spot to discuss a project contributes to personal physical and mental health, granting a little blood circulation and a chance to step back from that spreadsheet. While it is easy to pick up the phone or ping a teammate through inter-company communications, the extra effort to

walk to someone else's space helps build relationships within the company, and this generates better yields in the products or services being provided to the clients.

For managers, implementing a behavior and culture that gives "permission" to employees to engage one another is key. According to Fayard and Weeks, "Although few managers would want their employees to loiter all afternoon in the coffee room, neither should they want them to cut casual conversations short. People need time to engage if a light conversation is to evolve into something more substantial." And these substantial conversations are the building blocks of a solid team that can problem solve and meet client demands together.

The perfect balance of privacy and community looks different for everyone, and finding that within your company culture plays a significant role in the productivity and happiness of the employees.

### Making the Most of It

A cubicle-based environment does not mean co-workers have to be identical. Encouraging personality and individualism within company culture can improve employee morale, and a great way to do that is through unique cubicle décor.

These tips, combined with a balanced office design, can help make the modern cubicle an outlet for creativity and productivity. In the words of Dilbert, "They can make me work in a little box, but they can't crush my spirit."

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*f you work in a cube or similar space, here are some tips for making the most of it:*

**1** **SURF "CUBICLE DÉCOR" ON PINTEREST** to get your creative juices flowing. Pin some photos that make you feel energized and content.

**2** **INCORPORATE A PLANT**. If you are not near a window, this is especially important! Some plants that do well indoors with only artificial light are: African violets, air plants (tillandsia), pothos, cactus plants and peace lilies.
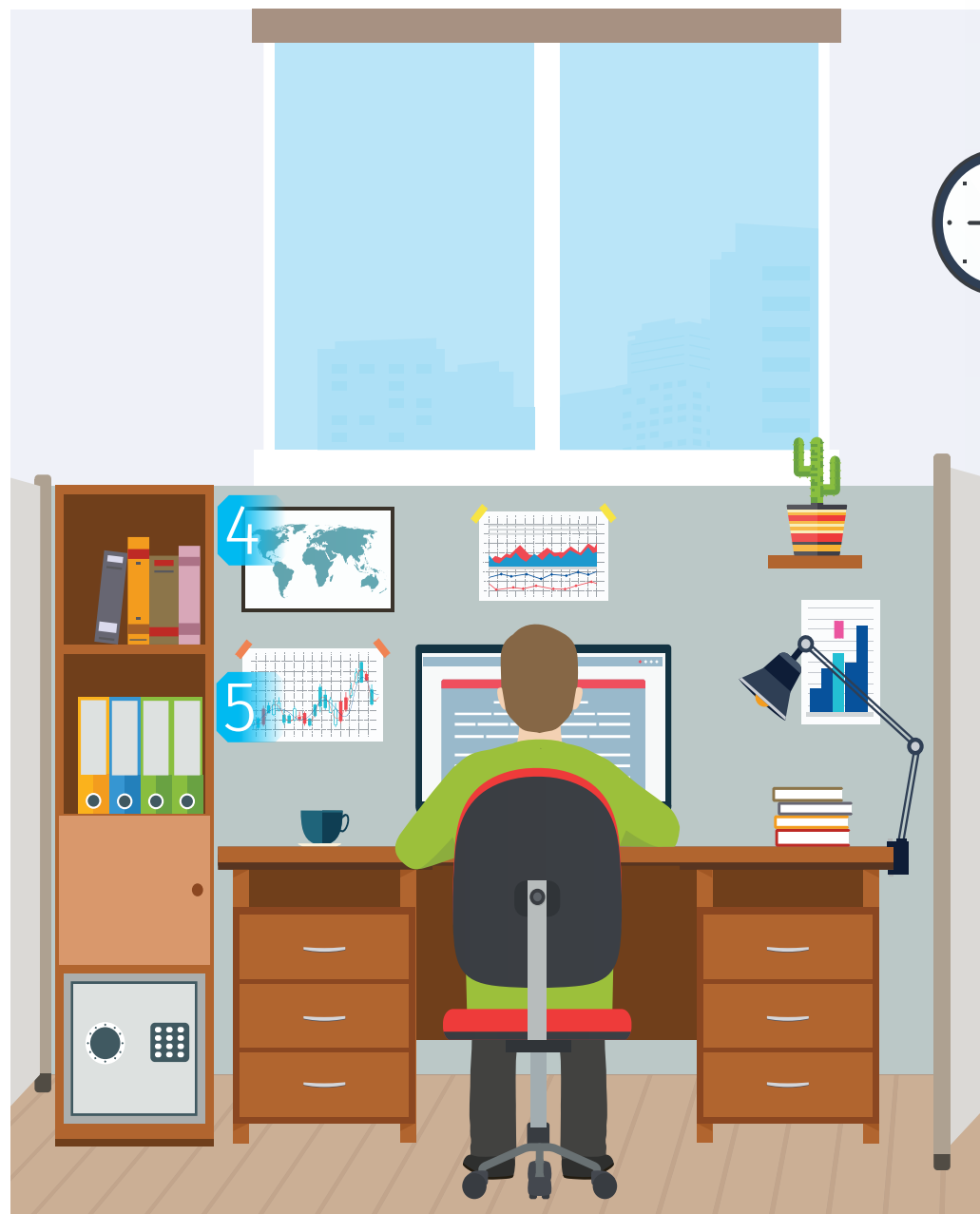
**3** **ADD COLOR**. You can create a faux wallpaper or just hang some posters or art that you love. If you have children, ask them to draw you something to show off in your space and lighten your mood.

**4** **BRING IN SOME INSPIRATIONAL QUOTES** that bring you joy and motivate you to work hard.

**5** **PERSONALIZE YOUR DESK AREA** and make it your own with photos of your family, friends, pets, or even a vacation spot that you love.