

B U S I N E S S

redrawing the CUBE

Your workstation is going to get smaller, chummier and a lot more hip. Dilbert, take note

By LISA TAKEUCHI CULLEN

CONSIDER THE CUBICLE. IT'S EASY: JUST SWIVEL 360° in your imitation Aeron chair. Ponder the various surfaces decorated with stacks of memos and coffee rings. Meditate on the file cabinets underfoot, the shelves overhead, the glow of the fluorescent reading light. Reflect upon the three walls papered with Post-it notes and your kid's macaroni art. It's hideous, but it's home.

Now say goodbye. A new generation of work-space design promises to tear down those padded walls. Office architects are envisioning improved cubicles—newbicles?—that feel private yet collegial, personal yet interchangeable, smaller yet somehow more spacious. Employing advanced materials, tomorrow's technology and the fruits of sociological research, designers are fitting the future workplace to workers who are increasingly mobile and global. Meanwhile, bosses are demanding rent-saving, productivity-boosting solutions to convince us that cubicles are cool. It might even work.

The father of the cubicle never meant to wreak such bleakness on the American office. We know this from the delightfully delusional name Robert Propst gave his invention: the Action Office. Back then, in 1968, most office workers toiled in open bull pens. Propst's pod offered at least as much privacy as they had in a toilet stall, albeit without the door. Corporate America, which is run by people whose offices have doors, has snapped up more than \$5 billion worth of the units from maker Herman Miller. Today 70% of U.S. office workers sit in cubicles, which have long transcended mere office furniture to become a



STEELCASE (2)



CUSTOMIZABLE
These cubicles from Steelcase feature desks whose heights can be adjusted with a touch. The green light overhead can be switched to red to tell the boss you're too busy for his golf tale



STEELCASE

EXPENSE REPORT, MEET MINORITY REPORT

In this concept from Steelcase's Project 2020, the office walls are gone and desks, cabinets and hard drives disappear. Cubicles are defined by chairs; work is displayed electronically on walls. "Clouds" float above for ambiance

OFFICE CONFIDENTIAL

Conversations are hush-hush in the Cell Cell, designed by Steelcase to give cube dwellers cell-phone privacy and spare the rest of us from TMI. It lights up when occupied, and boosters aid phone reception



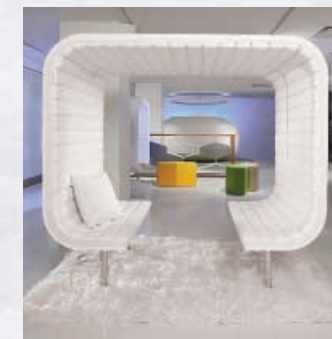
STEELCASE

HARMONIC

Sociological research shows that people are more apt to agree when sitting shoulder to shoulder than across from each other. Divorce lawyers, take note



STEELCASE



STEELCASE

TALK

Cozy seating areas, like this concept unit, are meant to draw pairs to chat without leaving the office—but away from cubicle mates who are actually trying to work



STEELCASE

JAM

Cube dwellers can cluster in these futuristic yurts, whose Corian shells muffle noise. Sensors cause the lights to brighten as the discussion—of work matters, of course—picks up steam

B U S I N E S S

pop-cultural icon (thank you, Dilbert).

As the millennium turned, however, it became clear there were issues with the cubicle. Its high, thick walls were too isolating. Its lighting and layout were designed for paper pushing, not laptop tapping. And—unbelievably—employers thought it took up too much space. A typical workstation in the 1970s measured 12 ft. by 12 ft., according to the American Society of Interior Designers. By 1995 it had shrunk to 10 ft. by 10 ft. Today's cubicles average 6 ft. by 8 ft., and space planners say they can cut an additional 21% without affecting productivity—or increasing the crime rate.

Enter Cubicle 2.0. At Herman Miller, it's called My Studio and is aesthetically reminiscent of the iPod. Framed by brushed steel and clear plastic, the pods are separated by low partitions that slide open for passing paper clips and gum. An occupant of a 6-ft. by 8-ft. cube could invite two colleagues to perch on the horseshoe-shaped desk. Storage seems sufficient: files tuck underfoot, cables hide behind a panel—there's even a closet. And here's the kicker: it has a sliding, shoji-like door. "Privacy is key to a worker's sense of territory," says Doug Ball, My Studio's designer.

Even as workplaces move toward more open seating, privacy remains a top demand among employees. A Knoll study found that 45% say they do their best work in "their own personal space." The top privacy-related gripe: overheard conversation, particularly from cell-phone shouters. So architects are being exhorted to help muffle cubicle babble. Some advocate loft ceilings, others white noise; a desktop gadget called Babble can broadcast garbled recordings of the user's voice to mask real conversation. "To be honest, I see a lot more people just wearing iPods at their desks," says Dennis Gaffney, co-director of workplace design for architects RTKL.

But designers agree that the best way to cap cube chatter is to move it. "To do that," says James Ludwig, director of design for Steelcase, "you need to create spaces for people to go." Steelcase is testing a concept called the Cell Cell, a phone booth fitted with reception boosters. Chatty colleagues might gravitate to the Dyadic Slice, designed for two, or hold brainstorming sessions in the Digital Yurt, whose sensor-triggered lighting oscillates with increased activity.

All that is taking place just as many employers are encouraging a more nomadic work style. At Sun Microsystems in Santa Clara, Calif., workers can pop into interchangeable cubicles, an increasingly popular option called hoteling. With 62% of office workers desiring flex time and 42% longing to telecommute, is the cubicle as we know it dead? "I don't think it should have ever been born, so I would love to say yes," says Alan Hedge, a Cornell professor who studies workplace design. "Technology already allows most of us to work from anywhere, but companies want to retain control." So enjoy your smaller, cooler company cubicle—just don't get too comfortable. ■

What does your work space look like? Send photos of your cubicle to emailus@time.com and we'll post a selection