

BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

It's summer in the office, time for a sweater

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A study conducted a decade ago, titled "Productivity Loss in the Office," attributed 32 percent of employee turnover and 20 percent of sick days to hidden discomforts in the workplace. "Discomforts" included things like noise, poor lighting, shoddy chairs, and bad office configuration.

In my own case, I spend each summer workday wearing a thick wool sweater, stuck in a windowless "pod."

My chair is nestled directly beneath Darth Vader, a giant deep-breathing, ice-churning monster that some folks call an HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) unit. It's boisterous, and it makes the entire space vibrate, while pouring down vapors at approximately 1 degree Kelvin.

The wool cardigan gives me a Mr. Rogers look, which I think is kind of fetching. It has replaced the tank top I wear in the winter when the HVAC unit pumps out so much heat that it saves my family thousands of dollars in vacation spending. Why go to Florida in February when we can spread out comfortably next to my desk and have a picnic?

It's easy to find physical annoyances at work to complain about. Unless you're one of the lucky still-employed dot-comers who finagled a coveted Aeron chair out of your CFO, chances are pretty good that there's some aspect of your work environment that's an ergonomic dud.

Your desk is too high. You're in the hottest spot in the office. There's an overhead pipe dripping rusty water on your papers. Or like myself, you've got no window. Whatever the problem, and whatever the deficiency, it makes concentrating difficult, and it can ruin the workdays.

The Dilbert comic strip made the pal-

pable monotony of cubicle life a pop-culture joke. Many of us work in these box-like offices. In some environments, the cubicles replicate themselves in all directions to create a landscape like the Labyrinth of Minos. In a place like that, it's challenging to fill a workspace with all the comforts of home.

But perhaps that's the root of my complaints: unrealistic expectations. After all, my office is not my living room. Am I really entitled to carnal euphoria at my office desk? The truth is, I am fortunate to work in a clean, safe office. And that's all I'm entitled to. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration goes to great lengths to make sure that American workers are protected from physical danger while on the job. It's not OSHA's responsibility to make my work space cushy as well.

If neither the government nor my employer is obligated to make my desk area homey and comfortable, I'll have to tackle the problem myself. Fortunately, short of hiring a lighting designer and buying more sweaters, there are myriad strategies I'm toying with that will increase my physical enjoyment of work.

Feng Shui, the Chinese art of arranging built space to achieve harmony, can be practiced in the workplace. The trick is to balance the *chi* of the universe's five essential elements: water, wood, fire, earth, and metal.

I've read that too much water can lead to passivity, and too little can cause anxiety. I'll just move the office water cooler a bit closer to my desk. That may work, since I've found no information about what "too much" or "too little" is; though I might run the risk of running to the bathroom all day.

Two more elements, wood and fire go together like, well, wood and fire. Wood manifests trust, and fire supplies vitality.

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I'll simply place a log beneath the heating unit this winter, and when it spontaneously ignites, balance will be achieved.

Earth enhances the qualities of stability and organization, and its *chi* can be found in earth tones. My giant beige computer monitor is about as earth-toned as you can get, and I could even Velcro a patch of AstroTurf to the top of it. And finally, there's metal, which is conveniently supplied by my friend, the HVAC unit. Metal is supposed to emit the qualities of clarity and perseverance (not to mention noise and chills).

Of course, I'd toss Feng Shui out the window in a second — if only I had a window.

A paper, by Judith Heerwagen, called, "Energy Effectiveness and the Ecology of Work: Links to Productivity and Well-Being," cites NASA studies that "indicate that mental functioning is aided when environments contain features that promote

'cognitive tranquility.'" Or in layman's terms, it's good to look outside every once in a while.

Modern technology to the rescue! So what if I don't have a window at my desk! I can just go out and buy one.

In the late '90s, Ernesto Machado and Thomas Yang founded The Virtual Window Co., which sells a 33-by-42-inch "window" you plug in and hang on a wall. It's basically a light box with a waterfall scene, made interesting with some innovative motion techniques.

A few months back I tried to make a cheap knock-off of this concept with our large-format color plotter. I printed a full-size house window, complete with Alpine mountains off in the distance, and hung it on the wall near my computer. My co-workers laughed at me.

If a fake window won't work, perhaps I should turn to the tested science of ergonomics. Derived from the Greek words, *er-*

gon (work) and *nomos* (laws), ergonomics is concerned with the physical, cognitive, and environmental aspects of how people work. Physical ergonomics focuses on things like repetitive movements and musculoskeletal disorders.

The young woman who sits adjacent to me at work is an ergonomic devotee. Her desk space looks like the bridge of the Starship Enterprise, with a rolling footrest, a two-tiered retractable keyboard tray, and a chair that has over 14,000 positions, by my count. I look like I'm sitting in a Tin Lizzie next to her. My itchy chair has only two positions: up and down.

Though I complain about the aesthetic and physical discomforts in my office, to be honest, I don't want to be too comfortable. What, then, would be the motivation to get me up and out of my chair?

I won't really be balancing *chi* any time soon. I don't plan on buying a light box. And I'm not forking over the money for a new chair. Instead, I'll go for a walk.

The positive effect of my discomfort at work — the out-of-season temperatures, the lack of daylight, my desk's orientation — is that it encourages me to periodically get up and stroll around. Every day, whether it's lunch or some other break, I force myself to go outside, look around, and feel the real heat and cold of the city. These interior irritants have reconnected me to the outside world.

The 20th-century philosopher of science Jacob Bronowski wrote: "Among the multitude of animals which scamper, fly, burrow and swim around us, man is the only one who is not locked into his environment." So although I might not be able to substantially change my office space, I do have the power to sometimes leave it. And it's the constant reminder of that freedom that makes me hope my office environment never changes.

If your office discomforts have gotten annoying, you might consider a walk as well.

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