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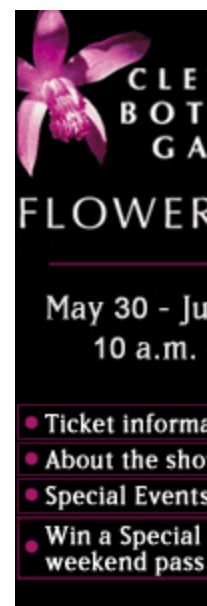
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Thinking outside the office box

05/05/02

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etting an office, or a better one, used to be part of moving up the job ladder. Not anymore.

It's a cubicle world, and Christopher Ryan finds it fraught with peril. Not to mention people who talk on speaker phones, eat smelly food and mind their neighbors' business.

Ryan calls himself the Cube Guy. He doesn't prefer a cubicle - only 7 percent of workers say they do - but he does give advice for life down on the cube farm.

"Many people, myself included, find it a frustrating experience," he said.

"Even when I'm not doing something that requires complete concentration, I find that some people's cubicle etiquette can be very irritating."

Maybe because the irritation can turn into "cube rage." Ryan noted that the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration says 18,000 workers are victims of nonfatal assaults each week.

That's a lot of frustration. But 40 million Americans, or nearly 60 percent of white-collar workers, work in what once were called "action offices." Some now call them veal pens.

"Their widespread adoption is a relatively new development in the workplace," Ryan said. "I don't begrudge it at all that companies have shifted to cubicles. It makes sense financially. But office etiquette and office procedures haven't caught up."

So he designed the Cubicle Survival Kit, a package of items "to make cube life more livable." He sells it at CubicleSurvivalKit.com, a tip-filled Web site he hopes will become a forum for the cubebound.

"It strikes a chord with people," he said. "I think it's an idea whose time has come."

Ryan, 36, had his own office - with a window - at the U.S. Securities and

Exchange Commission after graduating from law school in 1991. But seven years later, when he went to work for a software company, he was assigned to a cubicle.

"So were 75 percent of the company's employees, so I wasn't singled out," he said. "I had to adjust pretty quickly to the culture shock, and I came up with different tricks to make it more livable.

"You're caught in the middle, between silence and noise. That's the problem. In an office, you can have silence. In a totally open environment, there's that buzz of people working that creates ambient white noise. So the first thing I did was purchase a two-speed fan and leave it on all day. The humming knocked away a lot of the distraction of phone calls and people tapping on keyboards. Then I upgraded to a five-inch white-noise machine."

Ryan made an office one of his goals. But he found his "perfect job" last year at a dot-com where even the founder and CEO worked in a cubicle. He was caught in a mass layoff last month, which gave him time, in his cube-less home in Washington, D.C., to create the survival kit.

He figures it's a good gag gift, well-timed for graduations, but useful. The \$25 kit includes a white-noise machine and earplugs to block out chatter; a wide-angle rearview mirror, to warn of co-workers peering at your computer screen; a "faux window" poster simulating an outdoor view; and an "I'm Busy" sign.

Plus a clothespin. For your nose. Tongue in cheek. Actually wearing it for smelly cologne or food could cause more cube rage than it cures.

Even without the clothespin, however, isn't there a danger that full deployment of the kit could make its user the office geek and butt of practical jokes?

"It's an interesting question," Ryan said. "I don't think I go that far in creating an inhospitable environment. I've tried to create a few elements to give people the privacy and ability to work they deserve. The 'busy' sign would not be up all the time."

Then again, taking down the "busy" sign could cost you points with the boss. It's one of those facts of working that the survival kit can't help.

In a cube, in an office or someplace else, you're still boxed in.

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