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Cube rules aren't just for squares

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The years of sharing dorm rooms, dining hall tables and study rooms had paid off. Chris Ryan, fresh out of law school, had his own office, with a window.

The floor was carpeted. The door was shut when he wanted it to be. It was quiet.

Ryan left the office with a view at the Securities and Exchange Commission in 1998 and went to work for a software company, where 75 percent of the employees worked in cubicles. He was one of them.

"Maybe I'm an easily distracted person, but it was noisy," Ryan says. "I started off by getting a two-speed fan." To help drown out the phone conversations and keyboard tapping all around him, he turned it on when he walked into his cubicle in the morning and shut it off when he left at night.

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The open classrooms of the 1970s may have gone out of vogue because teachers learned it was impossible to teach above all the noise, but shared offices are a trend that seems to be here to stay. Forty million Americans – nearly 60 percent of white-collar workers – work in cubicles.

The high cost of office space combined with technology that is making all kinds of workers more mobile and able to work nearly anyplace "make Dilbertesque cubicle-lands the best known answer yet," says Gil Gordon, a Monmouth Junction-based telecommuting consultant.

The problem is, the dweller of the cube next door is not always a courteous neighbor. Office culture has changed, but some of our work habits have been slow to catch up.

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Gordon offers advice on everything from noise and smells (food and other) to privacy and common consideration. His guide is "Telephone Rings, Onion Rings and Other Annoying Things: Getting Along in Shared Cubicles and Offices Without Tearing Out Your Hair."

Here are a few of his tips:

- Talk on the phone in a volume so that the other person can hear you, but not so everyone within 50 feet learn the details of your plans for the weekend.
- Avoid using the speaker on the phone unless no one is around to overhear it.
- Being informal and working hard are great, but not when you end up making your cubicle or office smell like or look like the local diner. Avoid spicy or pungent foods whose odors will quickly fill up an entire department.
- What's yours is yours and what's theirs is theirs – avoid borrowing things without asking.

"I don't blame people for doing some of these things," says Ryan, 36. "The guy who goes and brings back a cooked fish sandwich for lunch just thinks, 'I'm having my lunch,' not 'I've just affected everyone around me for the rest of the day.'"

Ryan soon upgraded his two- speed fan to a five-inch white noise machine. About a year ago, he got the idea for a "cubicle survival kit" to make corporate life more livable. When he was laid off a few months ago from a dot-com (one where even the CEO worked in a cubicle), he decided to market his idea.

The kits come with a fan (basic package, \$24.99) or with a white noise machine (deluxe, \$59.99), along with a wide-angle rear-view mirror to see who's coming, earplugs, a "faux window" poster with a less-than-interesting view, and a clothes pin to block those awful odors.

For now, Ryan's a legal consultant and The Cube Guy, dispensing neighborly cubicle advice at www.cubeguy.com, enjoying the quiet of his – cubeless – Washington, D.C., home.

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