

The more we read and speak with others involved in our information technology-dependent, office building-dwelling business environment, the more apparent it becomes that the cubicle is the standard business configuration, even for managers. For those of us not lucky enough to telecommute, the cube is our home—albeit small—away from home. Cartoonist Scott Adams recognized the marketing potential of this venue long ago, developing a cast of ennui-laden characters to accompany Dilbert in his less-than-ideal workplace.

When my tenure as managing editor for a scientific journal ended, I returned to my other profession as a publications/documentation specialist—and

from the office to the cubicle. I was a bit surprised by fellow workers' flagrant, albeit unintentional, lack of courtesy for others working nearby. Speaking as if they are the only people within earshot, colleagues often converse in normal tones, laugh, and have a party, breaking the concentration of those around them. And asking the revelers to keep it down or to take it elsewhere often is considered discourteous.

Although we now have voice mail and e-mail, it seems that some simply would rather holler. To this end, I have assembled 22 rules for cubicle etiquette, which should help to promote greater thoughtfulness in today's office environment.

1. **Eavesdrop inconspicuously.** Although you don't mean to eavesdrop, often you simply can't help it—the walls of cubicles rarely exceed five or six feet in

height, so sound easily finds its way over the top. When someone adjacent to you asks someone a question for which you know the correct answer, resist the urge to volunteer this information. Doing so will only confirm that you were eavesdropping, even if it was unintentional.

2. **Get an invitation.** Do not enter another cubicle unless you are invited. And do not stand outside a cube to conduct a conversation. Converse in your cube or in that of your colleague.

3. **Do not be a pest.** Do not use sign language or whisper to attract the attention of someone who is on the phone. Return later if you see someone dialing, checking e-mail or voice mail, or involved in another activity.

4. **Respect meditation.** Think twice before interrupting someone who appears to be deep in thought. They probably are.

BY GARY M. SMITH
Senior Member

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CUBICLE

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5. **Be a soft talker.** Be aware of how your voice carries. Always use your “library voice” when speaking in a cubicle environment.

6. **Do not play with electronics.** Avoid using your speakerphone for conversations and voice mail retrieval. Also, if you listen to compact discs in your CD drive or to Internet radio, use headphones. There is no excuse for subjecting others to your taste in tunes.

7. **Keep private matters private.** Do not exchange confidential information in a cubicle. If you would not want it published in the local newspaper, do not discuss it in your cube. Try to find a meeting room, or take your conversation outside.

8. **Suffer alone.** If you are ill, stay home. No one likes a martyr. Neither do co-workers appreciate taking your cold or flu home to their loved ones. Understand that the first few days of an illness are the most dangerous in terms of contagion, and work from home during this time if you must work.

9. **Kick others out gracefully.** Walk toward the entrance of your cubicle when you would like to keep an impromptu meeting short. You can stand up and say you need to go to the restroom or make a copy. Be creative.

10. **Keep snacking to a minimum.** The smell, noise, and mess of snack foods may be offensive to others. Also, some people are allergic to certain snacks such as peanuts, and popcorn can make others nauseous.

11. **Decorate with taste.** Whether you furnish your office space with lava lamps and throw pillows or company policies and flow charts, remember that others view your cube throughout the day. Keep the half-nude pop icons and risqué cartoons to a minimum. Others may be offended on moral, religious, cultural, or sexual grounds. And you don’t need

a complaint filed against you.

12. **Prevent distractions.** If possible, arrange your desk to face away from your cubicle opening. Less eye contact could mean fewer interruptions. Also, avoid eye contact with others walking by if you do not want to be interrupted.

13. **Do not sneak up on others.** Not everyone has a cute rear-view mirror mounted on his or her monitor. And unless you can bring someone out of cardiac arrest with cardiopulmonary resuscitation or a defibrillator, follow the practice of knocking on a cube wall, saying “Excuse me,” or otherwise making your presence known before launching a discourse.

14. **Be cautious with foliage.** Although serving as good noise buffers, plants tend to drop leaves and leak water—and not only in your cubicle. Don’t overdo it; a conservative approach usually is better than cultivating a jungle. Remember that others may have allergies to certain plants, so you may want to discuss ornamental horticulture with your work mates before bringing in the landscapers.

15. **Respect privacy.** When working in a shared space, suggest to the others that you take lunch breaks at different times to allow each of you some quiet time.

16. **Avoid eating strong foods at your desk.** If possible, eat your Limburger cheese sandwich or roasted garlic and onion pizza in a cafeteria or break room.

17. **Watch your micro maize.** Do not leave your snack unattended in a micro-

wave. Few things smell worse than burnt popcorn wafting through everyone’s area.

18. **Plan construction projects for after hours.** Rearrange your filing bins and reconfigure your shelving after most people have left for the day. Or do it on a weekend. Others may be trying to work during your renovation.

19. **Get some exercise.** Resist the urge to ask your cube neighbor a question “over the wall.” Get up and stick your head around the corner, send an e-mail or instant message, or call on the phone to ask if your colleagues are available. Besides disturbing them, you will be disturbing everyone else by blurting out your query or comment.

20. **Plan for day care.** Working parents should plan for appropriate child care. No matter how cute your little angels are, your co-workers probably will not appreciate having a nursery next door.

21. **Mind your business elsewhere.** Use a pay phone, other remote phone, or cell phone (outside the office) for private phone conversations. No one cares to listen to your wedding plans, confrontations with your spouse, or details of your latest hot date.

22. **Do not offend the olfactory.** Scents travel as easily as sounds over cube walls. Use scented personal products in moderation.

A good rule of thumb for cubicle etiquette is that *if it bothers you when others do it, avoid doing it yourself.* Set a good example for colleagues. As the saying goes, “It is better to be a part of the solution than a part of the problem.” 🗨️

Gary Michael Smith is a writer, editor, publisher, educator, and lecturer in New Orleans. He can be reached at Publisher@ChatgrisPress.com.

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