

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

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## My old space is better off, but I miss what I had

By Joanne Mason | October 8, 2006

After six months, I have finally stopped referring to my former workplace in the present tense. I no longer say, "In my office, we get a ton of mail," or "My co-worker whistles songs by the Who every once in awhile."

I left that job to move across the state and pursue a new career teaching and writing. It was an amicable parting and I knew I would miss my colleagues. A replacement had not been hired when I left and there was droll banter about big shoes to fill.

Recently, I visited the office for the first time since my departure and discovered that my shoes have indeed been filled.

I enjoyed meeting my replacement. She and I had e-mailed back and forth after she was hired. She sounded efficient and thorough and I could tell she had a good sense of humor, a plus in any office, but especially in my old workplace. Other colleagues had told me what a great job she was doing, how pleased they were that she had come on board.

It was strange, however, to walk down the hall where my desk was and see a nameplate that wasn't mine. Stranger still, to see my workspace with its new organization and décor.

Walking into my old office was like walking into someone's living room. Rather than looking like a place where someone toiled away, it had an inviting air to it, one that made you want to make yourself comfortable.

My teenage years notwithstanding, I've never considered myself to be much of a slob. A believer in a creative mess, perhaps, but not an excessively messy person. However, I saw an enormous difference in what my replacement had done. Gone was the spaghetti-like mangle of equipment cords that I had been too lazy to tame. I hadn't noticed old files piling up on the top of the overhead compartments, threatening to fall on my head. The miscellaneous desk stuff — pens, tape, the stapler with the name of my predecessor on it — that could easily get strewn about when I sat there, were neatly set aside.

She even had room for family photos. My attempts at this had failed, as the frames always toppled over and I'd find my nephew leaning on the phone receiver.

The photos weren't the only homey touches that transformed my old space. I discovered that my replacement is a much better gardener than I am. I had watered my wilted spider plants (which were eventually forgotten and left on the moving truck in January) only when it occurred to me. I'd trimmed down their "babies" once the white petals started showering onto the floor. But my replacement's plants were a vibrant, solid green in sturdy, decorative pots, completely unlike the plastic pots I grabbed at the hardware store one day, an afterthought when buying a smoke detector.

There was more to the transformation. Good-natured jealousy flared in me when I learned that she was scanning a good chunk of the superfluous paper that I had always kept in the compartments. We didn't have ultra-scanning capabilities when I left, but now all that paper was going away, freeing up precious file cabinet space. In a few months, all of those folder-filled plastic crates I used as footrests would be gone!

I couldn't help but be curious. How would the workspace look at holidays? I had had a reputation at Halloween: My windowsills were always covered with plastic pumpkins, honeycomb paper spiders hung from any available hook, and a grinning white skeleton dangled from the doorknob to greet all visitors.

It was, admittedly, cheap and overdone. But every year, when the first spider discovery brought the "eek!" that got everyone laughing, I knew I had made my mark.

I wondered if I had given enough notes about the space, much like the "jiggle the handle" notes vacation homeowners leave for their renters. I had left a long box that had once contained a paper sorter in one of my compartments specifically for the air conditioning vent that rattled with a vengeance during the hotter months. One nudge with the box would keep it quiet for an hour or two. Did I remember to tell my replacement that? Or that the copier at the end of the hall was a shorter distance, but took a longer time to warm up?

Should I have warned her that the fluorescent lights above the desk weren't always best for the headache prone?

I found myself missing my old space, feeling a pang that it was no longer mine. When my employer moved to this building, I was delighted to learn that my main view was of a huge, beautiful, leafy tree. As my co-workers and I toured the newly furnished and redecorated office for the first time, someone called out, "Joanne, there's your tree!" In the midst of typing correspondence, I could stare at the tree, ponder nature, consider what really mattered, and then get back to work. And while there are plenty of trees to look at in my current neck of the woods, there was something about that tree that I wanted to take with me, but couldn't.

Maybe it was the space itself I wanted back. My current career has me working out of my car, in libraries, in a cramped bedroom/office with wallpaper from 1973, and classrooms that aren't officially mine. And while I much prefer the greater control I now have over my professional life, I still wouldn't mind a spot for a plant or two, wilted or otherwise. ■

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