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Closing the lid on the cube

As technology and the economy shrink the cubicle, companies are giving more thought to its design

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The traditional cubicle has been put back in its box.

Technological advances and budgetary retreats continue to bear down on the average allocated space per employee. Right now space per employee is anywhere from 150 square feet on the small end to 200 square feet on the generous side. Not all that long ago, 300 square feet was the norm.

But rather than see the oft-despised cubicle walls close in on the rank and file, architects and space planners are helping companies avoid a sardine tin scenario by giving more thought to the design of individual workstations and office layouts.

The result is a shift away from the clunky, impersonal feel of the traditional cube to a smaller, yet more efficient workspace.

“You need to make it feel like it’s not a downgrade,” said **Janet Morra, principal at Boston-based Margulies Perruzzi Architects**, who estimates that the average cube has shrunk over the past 10 years from an 8 feet-by 8 feet standard to 6 feet by 7 feet today.

Technology has played a major role. Cubicles require less depth thanks to the prominence of flat-screen computer panels, and for companies that encourage employees to use less paper, the need for storage space in cubes is declining. The reduction has made cubicle interiors more flexible, giving workers more control over their personal space.

Now the only fixed piece in most cubicles is a center spine that provides connectivity to a power source, according to Morra. Freestanding panels mean workers can move their chairs around the cubicle to face another direction or expand the structure to share space with colleagues.

In addition to size and structure, the design of cubicles is changing, said Ken Patrick, president of office furniture dealer Environments At Work in Boston. His clients are

asking for cubicles that provide more exposure to natural daylight, partly because of the trend toward sustainability. Lower panels and glass elements are becoming common, he said.

David Gamble, principal at Gamble Associates LLC in Boston, suggested that the backlash away from the traditional cubicle is the result of companies like Google breaking down the notion of the “employee in the pod,” and realizing the importance of comfortable work environments.

“Thoughts about air quality, light and temperature control are becoming more common,” he said.

Because the culture of a company dictates office design, the trend toward more revolutionary workstations is most prominent among industries that thrive on collaborative work.

At Mullen, the advertising agency that moved to 40 Broad St. from the North Shore in June, employees work in areas called “dog bones.” Chief Executive Officer Joe Grimaldi describes the workstations as three-sided structures that separate three employees by 16-inch opaque panels, enabling them to see one another as well the entire office floor.

Although cubes are shrinking, designers say employees have been willing to sacrifice personal space in exchange for collaborative space, including team rooms, impromptu meeting spaces and phone rooms.

One way companies are trying to reduce overhead is by encouraging employees to telecommute, said Dwight Patten, director of project management at tenant-representation firm Cresa Partners LLC in Boston. As a result, workers need to collaborate more on days when they are in the office.

Older spaces built to accommodate more individual work have hampered this working style, said Arlyn Vogelmann, head of workplace strategy in the Boston office of architectural and design firm Gensler.

“There’s not enough conference space, people are hanging over high cube panels and going in and out of offices all the time,” she said of older spaces.

Wireless capabilities embraced by a younger demographic have also made mobility a requirement.

“Anyone 30 and under wants to have the choice to work at some other place within the office,” Vogelmann said.

Gensler has responded by designing more “Starbucks-esque” areas for clients, including wireless cafes and areas with open tables and mobile tools, such as white board easels.

Because fewer closed offices and smaller workstations mean less privacy, some companies have created closed spaces intended for private conversations.

Mullen’s new office includes private spaces called “wellness rooms” where employees can go if they need to make a personal phone call or just relax for a few minutes.

“There’s been a redefinition of what personal space is,” Grimaldi said.

Being grateful to be employed has made it easier for workers to accept the changes, as has increased communication from employers, according to Patten.

“The unemployment rate is a compelling factor for them to take a lot more of a hit,” he explained.

To avoid employee backlash, a management communication strategy about the physical changes is very important. Specifically, businesses need to communicate to employees not just that they are getting less individual space, but that they are getting a space that better supports their working style and performance, Vogelmann explained.

“It’s not spin-related, but for people to truly understand why an environment is built a certain way,” she said.