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PRESS CLIPPINGS

Shrinking space leads companies to clutter control

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When consultants in the Atlanta office of HOK Inc., an architectural firm, moved desks recently, they were alarmed to be seated near Brian Karpinski, the office director of technology. While most of the consultants maintained relatively neat workstations, Karpinski kept boxes of CDs, computer cables, keyboards, laptops and printers strewn about his desk and on the floor.

At first, his new neighbors tried to tease him into cleaning up. "We'd ask him if his liability insurance was up to date because one of us was going to trip over his stuff," says Susan Mitchell-Ketzes, a principal in HOK's consulting group. Then the group offered to help Karpinski get organized. Fed up, they ordered a set of special 64-inch cubicle walls to surround his desk and close off the mess.

A war on clutter creep has begun. With workspaces shrinking, office neatniks are finally saying "enough" to their slob colleagues' wayward habits and insisting they clean up their act, or at least hide it. Some companies including United Parcel Service Inc. and General Motors Corp. have implemented clean-desk policies. Meantime, a cottage industry has sprung up to offer new tidy solutions such as spare drawers that squeeze under keyboards and extra-high cubicle walls.

One catalyst for the crackdown is the dwindling real estate that workers can call their own. "People are doing the work of one and a half people, but the actual space they have to contain

the mess is getting tinier," says Gillian Selby, marketing manager for the New York office of Smed International, an office furniture maker and unit of Haworth Inc. of Holland, Mich.

The average office space per person dropped from 410 square feet per employee in 1997 to 355 square feet in 2001, according to the Houston-based International Facility Management Association. That includes common spaces like lobbies, kitchens, copy rooms and reception areas — as well as workers squeezed into tiny cubicles and workstations of 40-square feet and less. The association says lack of storage space ranked fifth in a survey of common office-complaints. No. 1: The office is too cold.

Certainly, employees always have exhibited different levels of organization, but when they worked in private offices it didn't much matter to their colleagues. Now, the pack rats are literally bursting out of their workspaces. For some neater people, a co-worker's mess can interfere with productivity. "If somebody has stacks and stacks of papers, notebooks and catalogs stacked up, it begins to work on you," Mitchell-Ketzes says. "Instead of focusing on getting work done, you're worrying about that petty stuff."

That's why some companies require that employees keep tidy workspaces. At UPS headquarters in Atlanta, workers have long been told to clean up their desks at the end of every work day. Others have rules governing how people lay out their workstations. At General Motors' headquarters in Detroit, the company encourages employees to personalize

their desks, but prohibits them from bringing in anything that protrudes above the highest cubicle wall. The company also asks employees not to pile papers or other items on top of file cabinets.

Interior designers and office furniture makers recognize there is money to be made off the cramped quarters and are working to create more storage space in confined workstations. Some common solutions: mobile file cabinets that can be pulled out during the day but rolled under the desk at night; extra desk drawers that fit beneath computer keyboards; and communal banks of storage cabinets to supplement personal file drawers.

When GM moved 6,000 workers to its downtown Detroit offices starting in 1997, it threw thousands of them out of private offices and reassigned them to cubicles. That meant a significant reduction in personal storage space, so the company set up several off-site storage facilities.

"People had this perception that it would be like that last scene in 'Raiders of the Lost Ark,' " when a government warehouse worker pushes the prized ark past stacks of other archeological finds, says Matthew P. Cullen, a GM executive and chairman of CoreNet Global, an association of corporate real estate executives. "So we made a commitment to get stuff back to people within 12 hours (of an archive request) and we have another basement storage facility where people can get stuff out in two hours."

Meanwhile, for the stuff that people still need to keep close at hand, several furniture makers sell variations

on cubicle walls that feature multiple grooves where workers can hang in-boxes, small shelves, cup holders, binder bins and other accessories that help get files and other items off the desktop.

According to a division of Steelcase Inc., the Grand Rapids, Mich., furniture maker, sales of its version of the grooved cubicle wall have tripled from 4 percent of sales in 2000 to about 12 percent this year. Randi Larowitz, an associate at the Mufson Partnership, a New York design shop, says that when she recently helped a health care firm move workers into smaller cubicles, she gave them a similar amount of storage and work space by installing the grooved cubicle walls.

Smed has recently introduced a 15-inch-by-12-inch box that can be mounted on a pole or standing light fixture in a corner of a workstation. The company developed the product in particular for "bullpen" type offices — trading floors or other completely open offices where workers have very little filing space and not even cubicle walls on which to hang items.

Zeeland, Mich., furniture maker Herman Miller Inc. sells adjustable storage towers that can be configured to house anything from files to fax machines to running shoes. Made from stackable building blocks that can be turned in different directions, the storage towers can be shared by several workstations.

"We use the vertical space a lot more than has been used historically," says Ginny Baxter, senior manager of workplace dynamics at Herman Miller.