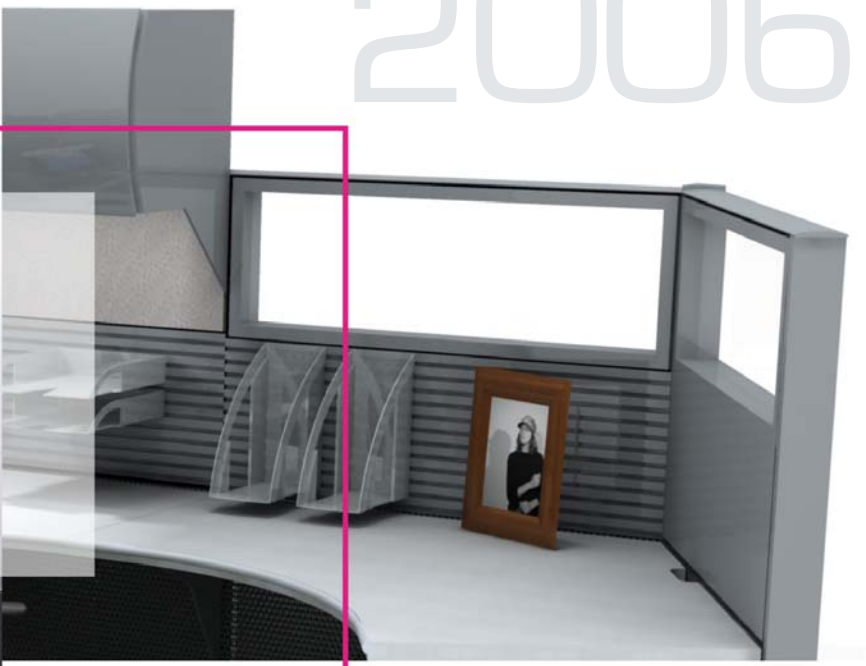


The State of the **Cubicle** What's Now & What's Next

2006





They have “official” names: workstations, systems furniture. But they’re best known by their informal names—cubicles, cubes for short—and that’s the identity that’s come to occupy a place on the national funny bone. There are volumes of Dilbert cartoons, books and associated commentary about them.

Jokes aside, cubicles are serious business—for the companies that make and sell them, the design firms that do projects with them, the companies that buy them and the people who spend a whole lot of time working in them.

What’s happening to cubicles as we know them today?
 What are the challenges and where are potential solutions coming from?

There are many conversations about where the cubicle goes from here, but most people agree that the one place they are not going is “away”—at least not for a long time. They’re not going to get bigger either. According to a recent article in the *National Real Estate Investor*, cubicles will continue to occupy a central place in office planning and “corporate space planners believe they can shrink space another 21% without affecting productivity.” That adds up to some very serious reduction, as the size of the average cubicle has already dropped from 250 to 190 square feet since 2000, based on survey findings reported in the article.

If that is the bad news, the good news is that changes are taking place now that are, literally and figuratively, beginning to take the harsh edges off those legendary paneled boxes. Some of those changes are happening because, as Steelcase researcher Margaret Alrutz says, “there is a humanity issue here.” Alrutz is part of a team at Steelcase that is doing user-centered research as a way to identify how to better support the people who work in cubicles and even improve the work they do all day.

“I” SPACES FOR ONE
 “YOU AND I” SPACES FOR TWO
 “we” SPACES FOR THREE TO SIX
 “WE” SPACES FOR SIX OR MORE

The Dimensions of Opportunity

The classic box is changing, no question. And virtually everyone who works in and with cubicles today sees that as positive. “Even the most conservative companies we deal with recognize the Dilbert-type issues,” says Paul Siebert, director of Workspace Futures at Steelcase. “Stuffing people into little boxes without any reflection of the different tasks or needs they have is over.”

But before the celebration begins, Siebert begins to outline the challenges that accompany the opportunity for new thinking about the cubicle. “It’s a balancing act,” he says. “You have to build in the ability to provide for both more and less interaction between people. You have to see that work and learning are social processes that have to flow naturally.” Most people work in a variety of different modes each day, he notes. Sometimes it’s in a team of six, more often in a team of two and then there is the solo work.

“The workplace has to create a sense of order for processes, work methods and people that on paper look like pure chaos,” Siebert says.

The key to creating that sense of order is what Siebert and others at Steelcase call “fluidity”— the ability to support the residents’ constantly shifting priorities. “If we don’t start by designing around processes and people, we never catch up. Adapting design and products to allow teams and individuals to *adapt* the workplace for their needs is a better direction than hoping you can *anticipate* what and how they may work,” he says. “We think that user-adaptive design will allow companies to minimize risk in planning.”

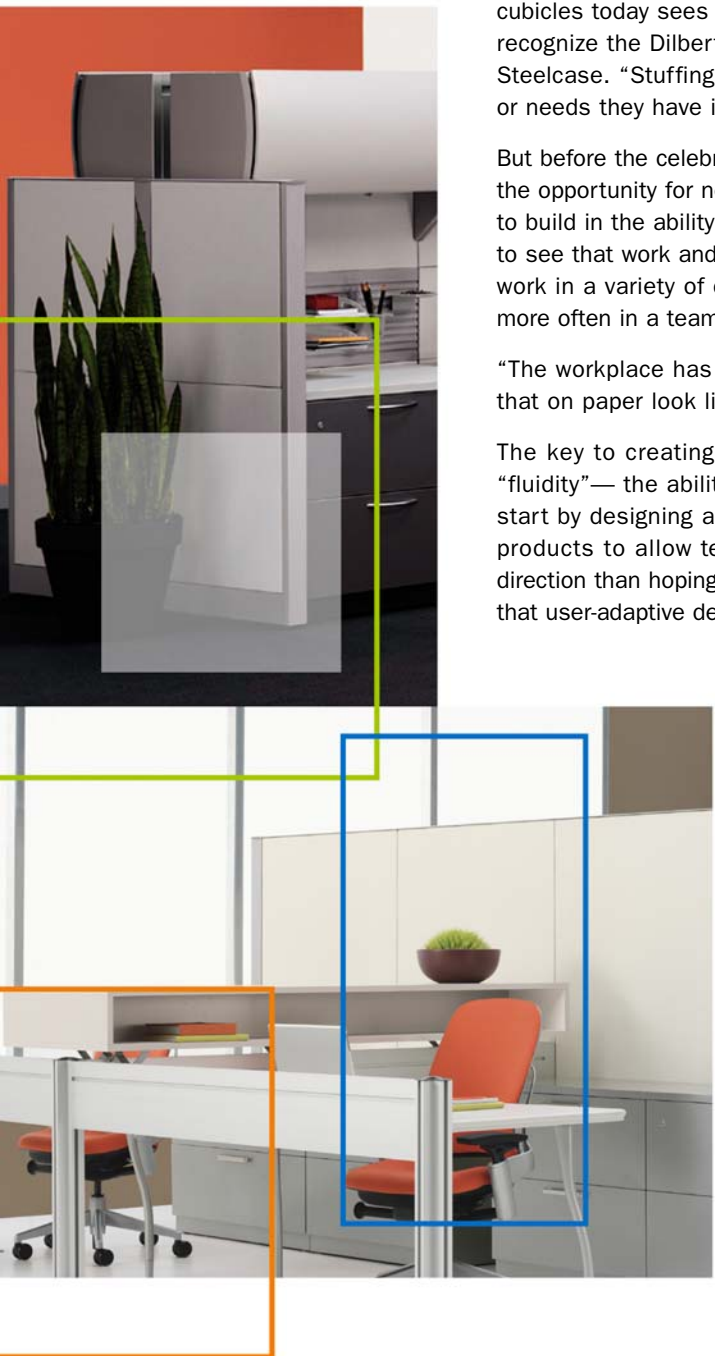
The factors to create a fluid workspace are:

Adaptability for individuals: A range of work tools and storage solutions that start by meeting the needs of most people and then further adapting for individuals who might have needs beyond the “standards.” Adapting for types of workers within an office can go beyond cubicle designs that have come to be called “typicals.”

Adaptability for teams: Steelcase researchers use the term “huddling around content” to convey the idea that teams typically meet for very specific purposes and may need access to tools (large computer monitors, whiteboards, etc.) that allow them to share content as a group.

Adaptability for the “twos and threes”: The largest percentage of interaction happens in groups of only two or three persons. Does the layout of individual cubicles or groups of cubicles support and also encourage that interaction?

Adaptability for technology: Different people and teams need different technology at different times. For example, Siebert says the premise that laptops can replace desktop computers is only partially true because “there are people who bottom out on laptops and can only fulfill their tasks with more powerful systems that allow for multiple, large-scale displays, group-based information sharing and just plain more.”



What Are All Those People Really Doing?

From the concept of fluidity and adaptability in cubicle landscapes, it could be a quick leap to the premise that people are working in a lot of “new” ways that have nothing to do with a central workplace. Based on popular *zeitgeist* fueled largely by wireless product marketers, you might think that vast numbers of people are working in unique ways, in unique environments and collaborating in entirely novel ways. Soon we’re all going to be working from lounge chairs at Starbucks, from laptops in our cars, from our homes or from park benches on sunny days... right? And the office, with all its cubicles, is going away...right?

Chris Congdon, manager of corporate marketing at Steelcase, and others at Steelcase throw cold water on that idea. Congdon agrees that mobile technologies are changing the ways we communicate, but there is a surprisingly high number of people who are still tied to working out of personal workspaces (i.e. cubicles) in conventional office environments, according to Steelcase research.

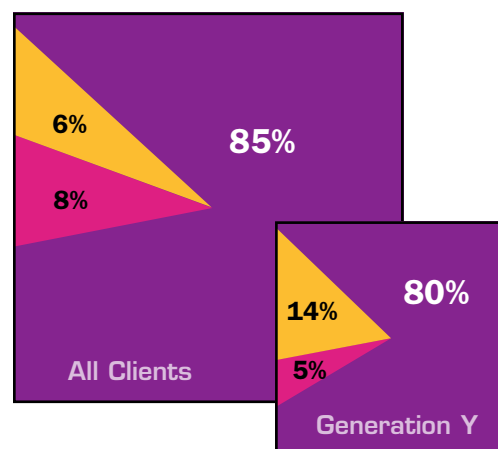
“Our research says that the office is evolving, yes, but there isn’t a real revolution going on,” Congdon says. She cites research indicating more than 85% of white collar workers still work in personal workspaces. Surprisingly, the number drops only to 80% for those in Generation Y (see chart), despite their reputation as *ubergeeks*.

So being connected and co-located still matters? “People aren’t working in a single way as the original cubicle design made it seem,” Congdon says. “But, fact is, the workplace serves a purpose in making people feel connected to their employers, their teams and customers. We have to work from that standpoint forward.”

“The way we say it is that we can often see the future at the edges of today—meaning that the most progressive customers are already trying some of the things that we think will be mainline 10 years from now,” says Mark Greiner, Steelcase’s senior vice president of Workspace Futures. “We believe that the future will be much more dispersed or disaggregated—that more work will occur outside of offices than it does today and there will be an emerging new type of workplace that sits in-between the office and individual work at home...”

Because the office is primarily a social experience, “people will still come together for the social interaction between individuals,” Greiner notes, “and the most diffi-

Work Styles



- **Office Workers** — At personal workspace
- **Mobile Workers** — In building or on-campus; not workspace
- **Remote Workers** — Off-campus, at other companies or traveling

Who People Work With...

	Office Workers	Mobile Workers	Remote Workers
Work Alone	62%	37%	50%
2 People	16%	23%	23%
3–6 People	14%	26%	19%
> 6 People	8%	14%	8%

cult problems really still need to be solved face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball....”

Even within an office campus, Greiner says work will become increasingly disaggregated because of the mobile nature of technology. “Some work will be done in a learning-center environment, some work will be done in a library-type environment, some work will be done in the cafeteria...,” he notes.

As a marketer Congdon is focused on what customers want now and she sees plenty of opportunity for Steelcase, architects and designers in the current

scenario. “One size isn’t fitting all. There is not infinite variety, but close enough. People want a place in the workplace to call their own, and a lot of work and product knowledge is being focused on allowing them to do that in new ways,” she says.

Is Perception Reality?

How the workplace is perceived is a factor in making the cubicle more livable and effective. Most of the cubicle jokes out there have to do with the way the work is organized, not the place the work is done. And research confirms that there is still lots of individual, heads-down work being done in offices. For some office workers, such as software engineers, the cubicle is regarded as a desirable getaway place because of the acoustical and visual privacy it provides. So perhaps cubicle farms are getting a bad rap?

As head of design for Steelcase in North America, James Ludwig admits he’d like to make the cubicle as we know it obsolete. “Our goal in design would be to unfold the cubicle in ways that might make it unrecognizable,” he says. “We just keep stepping back and thinking how we can see the problem differently.”

That means getting increasingly focused on perceptions of space, privacy and openness—rather than on trying to alter the fact that spaces are becoming smaller and systems furniture is taking on an increased role. Because so much happens in a typical workday that no one is really able to totally recall from memory, “more than ever, we’re watching what people do in the office rather than what they say about it,” Ludwig says.



Acknowledging the Problems

Steelcase researchers like Margaret Alrutz watch and listen very hard to what people say about working on, in and around cubicles. Alrutz has a firm grip on the reasons cubicles have come to occupy such a controversial place in our work culture—she’s pretty much heard them all. As part of the Steelcase team, Alrutz has done hundreds of hours of research, closely observing people who work in cubes and listening to them talk about what they’re doing and how their workstations are working for them — and against them.

She says the “issues” with cubicles depend on where you happen to sit, whether you are a resident, a facility manager, a corporate real estate manager or sitting in your private C-level office.

Resident Issues:

- Acoustic and visual privacy
- Temperature and air circulation
- Lighting

Facility Management Issues:

- Problems with moves, adds and changes (and the problems increase exponentially as the number of teams increase)
- “The Unfulfilled Promise of Standardization”—i.e., one size does not fill all
- Warehousing the parts and pieces

Real Estate and C-Level Management Issues:

- Reduce the footprint & save space
- Save money
- Balance cost-savings with return on investment
- Protect or evolve company culture (A catch-phrase at Steelcase is, “You mess with space and you’re messing with culture.”)

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This research is uncovering new insights into things such as the numbers of people individuals really interact with in a day (they overestimate) and the people they most need to interact with. Armed with new knowledge, new ideas about office furniture are emerging.

“People work in small groups, one or two people most often,” Ludwig points out. “We are in the process of expanding the tools available to help them work together. Some of that knowledge could be applied now with existing products. For example, let people see the people they work with and then some of the communication can become either less verbal or non-verbal.”

Interestingly, there are also opportunities to alter the perceptions people have of the space they actually work in. “We’ve put people in two spaces, one smaller than the other. With some relatively simple fixes, such as allowing them to see the floor beyond their space dividers, they will swear to you that the smaller space is larger than where they already work. It’s a whole field of opportunities that ultimately could make what we call cubicles now an old joke.”

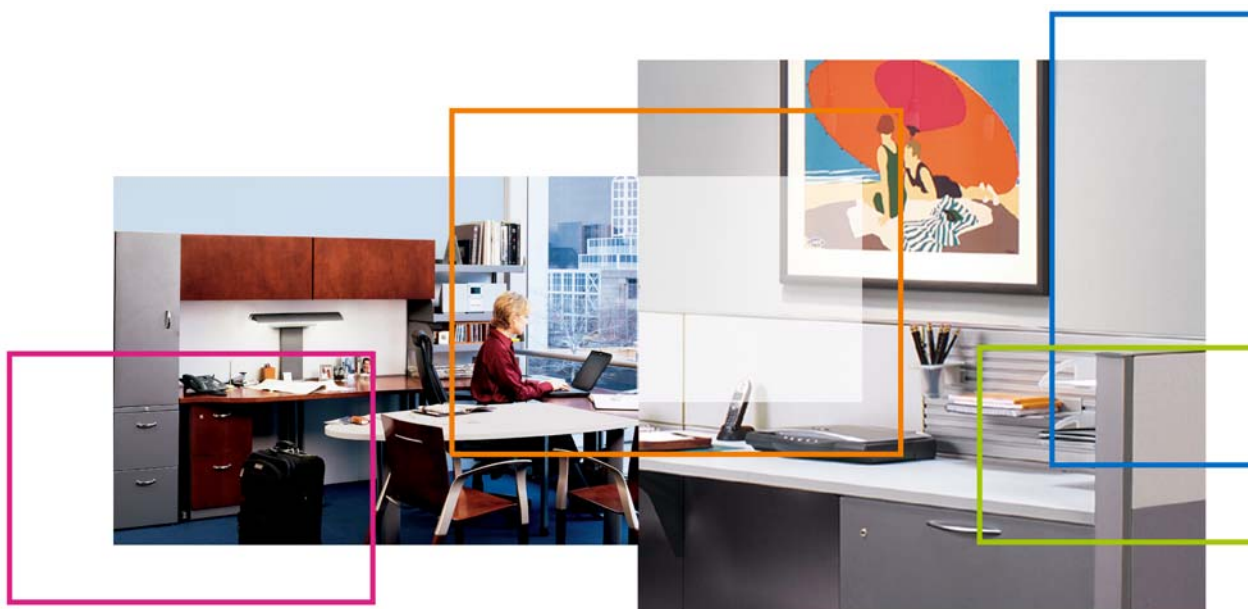
So Now What?

What are companies and teams doing now to create a newer, hopefully better workplace? Ask the people who sell Steelcase’s products and the answer is, “Looking for help.”

Ryan Anderson, a member of the Solutions Resource Team at Steelcase, believes customers want companies to give them some confidence in the decisions they need to make. “We get so many people asking us what I think is a very basic question: What kind of changes are you seeing?”

According to Anderson, price is always a top priority, but the newest and perhaps most surprising question that purchasers are asking is, “Would I want to work here?” In the late 1990s, criteria such as panel flexibility, connectors, stackability and cable capacity were big factors in buying decisions. Today, it’s more about user adaptability, user acceptance, aesthetic acceptability and appropriate storage. That translates into lower panels so collaboration comes easier, fewer space-consuming files for papers now that more work is stored digitally, and other discernably different features (see illustration).

But what about the acres of 6-packs and 8-packs of cubicles already out there? Kyle Williams, general manager of Steelcase Systems Business, believes the key is seeking out



opportunities for change—helping people bridge from where they are now to where they want to be.

For example, reducing the size of individual workstations, updating some components and using the freed-up square footage to create adjacent collaboration areas and enclaves can be a more realistic solution than buying all new workstations all at once. “A major challenge is how we can help older products migrate toward becoming more adaptable work spaces, providing opportunities for integration of new technologies and increasing adaptability,” says Williams.

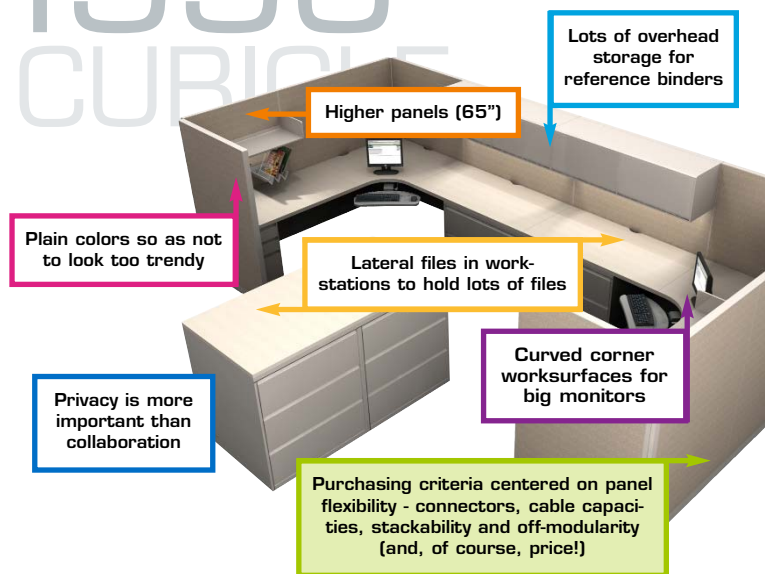
Adds Alrutz: “We’re interested in techniques for taking enormous open-floor plans—300 employees on the floorplate, or more—and making them feel less intimidating, more like a community. One way is to mix the panel heights.”

The original reasons they succeeded remain: cubicles are space-efficient and relatively flexible from a space-planning point of view, and they’re relatively low cost. “Those criteria still exist and are not going to go away,” Williams says. At the same time, he indicates, today’s creative class and knowledge workers aren’t willing to fit the established Dilbert mold. “We’re being challenged to help people work together better in the ‘We’ spaces and be satisfied with the time they spend alone in their ‘I’ spaces.”

With just 30% of today’s office workers in private offices, most people’s “I” space is some evolution of the cubicle. Clearly, whether it fits the grid or breaks the mold, the cube remains an icon to be reckoned with—in 2006 and beyond. •

What Kinds of Changes Are We Seeing?

1998 CUBICLES



2005 CUBICLES

