

## 'Cubicle Land' -- how to stand out

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By Jonathan Bender

**(LifeWire)** -- G.I. Joe slowly invaded Jeff Patton's cubicle in Salt Lake City, Utah. First it was action figures, then lunch boxes, then comics from a collection that had overflowed from the senior inventory control coordinator's home.

You might a Grinch, Lorax or resident of Whoville in this cubicle.

"My collection did make me feel more at home in my cubicle," Patton, 34, says of his paraphernalia, recently displayed on CNN's iReport.com.

"I felt more unique than the rest of my co-workers. I finally had a place to openly express my interests," said the employee at Nellson Nutraceutical.



The problem, a common one, is that Patton found himself becoming too comfortable in his space last year. "My work was starting to suffer as a result," he says. "I wasn't supposed to feel at home in my cubicle -- I needed to be out on the floor supervising my employees." After meeting with his boss, Patton emptied his cube of the action figures, which some co-workers had found "childish" or "weird."

Welcome to the cubicle-shaped world of work nesters. Patton, like many "Office Space" and Dilbert fans, got caught up in the struggle to carve out an identity in a sea of endless gray walls. The snap-on cubicle -- which even its designer, Robert Propst, eventually came to see as "monolithic insanity" -- continues to dominate the office furniture market. And 40 years after the cubicle precursor "Action Office" was introduced, employees are searching for inspirational and personalized ways to spice up their box-like surroundings.

"After 9/11, there was a huge move toward wanting to nest," says lifestyle consultant Kelley Moore of Seattle, Washington, author of "Cube Chic: Take Your Office Space from Drab to Fab!" "We find ourselves connecting a lot more with our environment because we want to get to know people."

## **Feathering the nest**

If you need something from Mike Oswald, 34, you'll have to walk through the wooden saloon doors on the front of his Western-themed cubicle to get it.

"It's something to look forward to, rather than coming in to the routine. By now, everyone knows me in the office and understands it's just my personality," says the quotations manager for a Milwaukee, Wisconsin, electrical equipment manufacturer.

Corporations in creative fields tend to be more permissive when it comes to desk decor.

"Graphic design companies (and) tech companies are really supportive because those companies are on the cutting edge," says Moore. "They need new ideas, so they embrace the creative side."

Merlot Marketing Inc. offers seasonal cube decoration contests at its Phoenix, Arizona, offices to spur innovation and build community. The winners over the years have included a "happiness" theme cube, with everything from a happy-face couch to smiley-face toilet paper; a jungle motif featuring zebra-print walls; and a shrine to the Will Ferrell movie "Blades of Glory."

Then there's the morale factor. "A workspace or cubicle should be individualized," says Neil Newman, 31, human resources manager for the Phoenix School of Law. "The unique decorations are conversation pieces, and it is conversation and relationships that help with retention."

## **The cube police**

Although a wacky workspace can inspire creativity, it can also harm productivity.

Sam Gosling, associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, discovered during research for his new book, "Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You," that customized cubes can create tension in the workplace, even with decorations as simple as a photo display.

"People use their offices to express -- deliberately and inadvertently -- what they're like all the time, and that can bother people," says Gosling. "We also don't like show-offs, and you can brag with your pics: 'Look at my fabulous kids and pets and places I've been.'"

For nesters like Mike Oswald -- he of the swinging saloon doors -- it's worth the risk. In his cube, Oswald set up a slot car set from home. Before answering questions from co-workers, he would challenge them to a race -- that is, until his superiors informed him the track was unprofessional.

"I kind of like feeling my bosses out a little bit at a time," says Oswald. "I've done that everywhere I've worked. By pushing the limits, I can find out if I'm valuable or not."

To avoid conflicts, many corporations have clamped down on decorations. Moore says conservative industries like banking traditionally have sought to keep employees from displaying offensive or political material. While many policies are not formalized in an employee handbook, companies are making sure workers know when they've gone off the decorating deep end.

**Aaron Witsoe, president of Phoenix-based human resources firm Creative Business Resources, has talked to his employees about keeping cubicles clutter-free. "Employees needing an organized work space may become frustrated and unproductive when surrounded by cubicles that are really busy with decorations," says Witsoe.**

Tim Courtney, 26, a marketing specialist in Lisle, Illinois, voluntarily chose the Spartan approach. "I believe a neat desk is a reflection of a well-prioritized and disciplined mind. Creative types like me are seldom neat, and if I let my discipline go, I am prone to messy piles."

For tech escalation specialist Tim Maguire, 31, work is work. He has only a framed photo of his wife and a Red Sox calendar hanging in his Boston, Massachusetts, office at Thomson Reuters.

"I look at a desk as more of a functional thing, rather than a place I like to hang out," he says. "It doesn't make me any happier that I have to come to work if my cubicle is decorated."