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## Life at Work

Amy Joyce



### Watching Your Back at Work

With New Mirrors, Lack of Trust May Be Closer Than It Appears

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They're not just for cars anymore. Today's Dilbert-esque cubeland is a hall of mirrors, thanks to the rearview desk mirror.

What does this say about us?

The mirror is an object that shouts out, "I don't trust you, you annoying co-workers of mine." Or it could be an item that tells a boss, "You can't put one over on me, lady."

Maybe it's simply a way of doing better business, when placed in a cubicle that puts your back to the door. Or it could be for people who are easily startled.

Whatever the case, those odd rearview desk mirrors attached to computer monitors are almost as popular as Post-its -- in that kind of weird office kind of way.

Today's workplace is all about physical openness. The office is almost a thing of the past, and cubicles, open space or, in some offices, big worktables R us. The fact is, most of us sit in cubicles, where we can't call the doctor without a cubemate asking us later if we got that boil lanced yet. Where we have to ask our neighbors to keep it down if we're on an important call, or where we know our co-workers' children almost as well as they do by staring at the pictures all day:

"Oh, little Jimmy is walking, huh?"

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Oh, I just noticed the new picture."

Open office space can be good for productivity, or bad. Some tell me their co-workers are more apt to steal their work now that they share cubicle space. Or that it's hard to concentrate with all the conversations going on. Or the boss catches grammatical mistakes before you send an e-mail. This forced openness can also cause fake openness, depending on whom you ask. There are a lot of folks out there who, now that their neighbor is right *there*, are less trustful. Their co-workers have turned into people to be wary of, and the same thing with the boss. All things leading to that rearview mirror hooked up to your computer, some say

Has it really gotten to this?

Life at work never ceases to amaze. I have co-workers with mirrors. I assumed they were something of a joke, until a few people set me straight. Not only do some people have mirrors, they have "incognito" mirrors. Wes Kirk, an art director and production manager at the National Association of Real Estate Investment Trusts in the District, has a compact disc taped to his computer monitor for this purpose. He shares a cubicle with two other people, and his back is always toward the entrance. The CD lets him know what or who may be sneaking up on him, and it's a little more subtle, or, as he puts it, "abstract."

"I don't want folks to think I'm spying on them spying on me," he said.

One woman, a secretary, said she keeps a shiny plaque from an office softball tournament at a particular angle. Another secretary said that at her last job she used a framed picture of her family -- she advises that it works better if the photo has a dark background -- to make sure someone wasn't quietly looking over her shoulder. She also said the person before her was fired for putting up a mirror. "Of course, I quit that job before too much longer because of the harsh, controlling atmosphere."

Really, people? Depressing.

At an online company called Think Geek, you can not only buy a compact computer mirror but also post pictures of yourself using your mirror. Some are pictured playing practical jokes on co-workers; others are seen stressed and disheveled after a computer crash. (Thanks to the reader who pointed this one out to me: [www.thinkgeek.com/computing/accessories/2940](http://www.thinkgeek.com/computing/accessories/2940).)

Make sure to check out the action shots.

When Jennifer Vanmeter, a principal consultant at the Touchstone Consulting Group in the District, worked in San Francisco, everyone used the mirrors. In this wonky town, not so much, she said. "I kind of think they're geeky," she said (see above). "Not that I'm any less dorky." She recently made a sign with "The Doctor

Is In" on one side and "The Doctor Is Out" on the other. "We're consultants," she explained. "We're good at talking. That means we're also very good at coming to my cube to distract me."

But she swears she won't use a mirror to tell her when those chatty co-workers are coming her way. "I don't use it when I'm riding a bike, I'm not going to use it at work." Anyway, she said, it would have to be a huge mirror. Her office space is *very* open. "I've just given up on any sense of privacy."

Heather Bradley, co-founder of the Flourishing Company, a coaching firm dedicated to "changing the way people work," seemed a little thrown off when asked about those who worked with rearview mirrors. Well, for one, it can be a good customer-service vehicle, she said. And of course, some people like to check their lipstick during the day.

But it also can be a sign of the culture of the company, she said. "It can be a symbol of escalating distrust in that particular environment," Bradley said. She said a good manager always makes sure to get out among employees. And if the manager starts seeing more mirrors, a light bulb should go off.

Of course, thanks to the mirrors, those folks could warn their co-workers when the manager was coming around the bend to get out among them. And they can quickly alt-tab away from eBay and back to the report they're supposed to be writing. Phew.

*Join Amy Joyce on Tuesdays from 11 a.m. to noon for her regular Life at Work live online discussion at [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com).*

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