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The perfect office

Marc S. Levine, MD

If your home is your castle, what does that make your office? Mine must be a cathedral because it is the most sacred place I know. Every one of my accomplishments in academic radiology was born, nurtured and honed for public consumption in the inner sanctum of my office. Ditto for the meetings with medical students and residents that launched a thousand careers. None were in radiology, but that's beside the point. The bottom line is it's nearly impossible to have a successful academic radiology career without a proper office. I therefore appeal to radiology chairs everywhere to restore order to the universe by giving faculty members the offices they deserve. Here, then, are what I believe to be the critical elements for the perfect office:

Solitude. You cannot be academically productive if you share your office with the Vienna Boys Choir, the entire cast of *The Walking Dead* (zombies included) or the Munchkins from the *Wizard of Oz*. Prior to my appointment, private offices were standard operating procedure; every Tom, Dick, Harry and Sally who joined the department dating back to the beginning of time got his or her own office. Then the unthinkable happened.

Office space dried up.

That meant the new guys (ie, *moi*) had to share. Growing up, I couldn't abide sharing a room with my younger brother. How was I supposed to share an office with a perfect stranger? Cohabitation may be acceptable

for violent criminals and sociopaths in overcrowded prisons, but not for junior academic radiologists trying to launch their careers. I was crushed. Utterly demoralized.

But it gets even worse.

I had to share an office with not just one, but *two* new faculty — that's *three* radiologists squashed into one office that used to be a janitor's closet. I may not be an expert on quantum mechanics or the space-time continuum, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that three's a crowd. One of my office mates was a failed stand-up comedian; whenever I started to doze off, he'd wake me up with another bad joke. My other officemate became my best friend in the department, and as everyone knows, best buds never shut up. How could we get anything done with so many *Seinfeld* reruns to discuss? The way things were going, I could be more productive in my sleep.

Unfortunately, that's the way it went, even after my first two office mates rode off into the sunset of private practice. I continued to share an office with a series of colleagues who stuck it out for less time than one of George Steinbrenner's managers. I don't know if it was me or the dartboard I hung on the back of their chairs, but my department chief finally got the message and gave me my own office. The rest is history.

Space. And lots of it. Like they say in the trailer for *Godzilla* (the one with Matthew Broderick, not the earlier one with Raymond

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Burr or the later one with Bryan Cranston), size *does* matter. Would you rather work in an outhouse or in the White House? Unless you have really bad irritable bowel, that's a no-brainer. The same goes for your office. Ask yourself why God created offices in the first place. The answer, of course, is so you can impress people. But you can't browbeat, bamboozle, brainwash or bedazzle anyone, not even the pizza delivery guy, if your office is no bigger than the aforementioned janitor's closet. No one would believe a word you say. That's why size is of the essence. The more cavernous your office, the more sway you hold at meetings and the more power you wield over your friends in radiology — not to mention your enemies. As a side note, shape can also work to your advantage. It helps, for example, to have an oval office (as in *the Oval Office*). It also helps to have someone in a crisp, dark suit with an American flag on the lapel standing outside your door. If that doesn't give you instant credibility, I don't know what will.

Warmth. Nothing is more critical than the temperature of your office. My own comfort zone is even narrower than my interests outside of radiology. Anything over 72°F causes me to break into a sweat and anything below gives me the shivers. Fortunately, the thermostat just happens to be in my office, giving me exclusive power to adjust the temperature based on my circadian rhythms, hormonal fluctuations, or emotional responses to the Dow Jones Average on any given day. I have total autonomy. Did I mention, by the way, that that very same thermostat controls all of the offices on my corridor? Some of my hypothyroid colleagues periodically beg me to turn it up, and I'm willing to live with a little discomfort — if the price is right. Indeed, my thoughtfulness and flexibility have put all four of my kids through college. But I digress.

No windows. I know you're thinking I've lost my mind, but windows are to offices what kryptonite is to Superman. By that, I mean your Achilles heel. How can you possibly be productive gazing outside your office on a gorgeous day with a clear blue sky, brilliant sunshine and a spectacular vista? You can't. It's impossible to accomplish anything when the world outside beckons like a powerful narcotic. Either you'll

get up and leave or you'll spend the next four hours wishing you had. Windows are a colossal mistake. Four blank walls, on the other hand, create the illusion that there is *no* world outside, enabling you to focus on what really matters, like playing video games. Any questions?

Tall, thick, solid walls. I know what's going through your mind: Who cares about walls? You do, dear reader, or at least you should. When it comes to the walls of your office, pay special attention to three critical items: height, thickness and materials. Believe me, they all matter.

- Height first. The walls of your office should go all the way to the ceiling. If they don't, it means someone pulled the wool over your eyes and you don't really have an office. You have a cubicle. This has important repercussions, as sound travels through space faster than a speeding bullet. You don't want everyone within 100 yards listening in on that call with your shrink, bookie or parole office. As an academic scholar, you're entitled to a little privacy. Your psychoses, gambling debts and past criminal activities are your own business. End of story.
- Thickness is equally important. You don't want paper-thin partitions, as these structures afford about as much acoustic protection as ear plugs at a rock concert. This again has major implications for privacy (see previous item).
- Last but not least, let's talk about wall materials. Glass walls are the latest trend in offices at upscale companies like Google and Facebook. If you never use your office and import all your furniture from the finest woodworkers in Italy, glass walls might be your thing. If you actually spend time in your office, however, you might think twice about having your co-workers see you pick your nose, eat your third doughnut or drool all over your desk while taking a nap. Not to mention the fact that glass walls have a tendency to shatter on impact — a matter of some importance if you get into a fight with the goon your bookie sends over to collect on that unpaid debt. I can tell you from firsthand experience, glass cuts bleed a lot. But that's another story.

Until next time.