Office Space

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People are always asking me how I manage to get so much done. For a while I tried to impress them with my pearls of wisdom but soon I just sort of gave up. I don't really feel like I do anything special — I worry about getting stuff done a lot, but mostly I just sort of do it.

It wasn't until I started working in an office that the question begun to make sense. Since I moved to San Francisco I literally haven't gotten anything done. I haven't finished a book (I finished three on the plane out here), I haven't answered many emails (I used to answer hundreds a day), I've written only a couple blog posts (I used to do one a day), and I haven't written a line of code (I used to write whole programs in the evenings). It's a pretty incredible state of affairs.

You wake up in the morning, take some crushing public transit system or dodge oncoming traffic to get to work, grab some food, and then sit down at your desk. If you're like most people, you sit at a cube in the middle of the office, with white noise buzzing around on every side. We're lucky enough to get our own shared office, but it's not much better since it's huge windows overlook a freeway and the resulting white noise is equally deadening.

Wired has tried to make the offices look exciting by painting the walls bright pink but the gray office monotony sneaks through all the same. Gray walls, gray desks, gray noise. The first day I showed up here, I simply couldn't take it. By lunch time I had literally locked myself in a bathroom stall and started crying. I can't imagine staying sane with someone buzzing in my ear all day, let alone getting any actual work done.

Nobody else seems to get work done here either. Everybody's always coming into our room to hang out and chat or invite us to play the new video game system that *Wired* is testing. The upside is that while we haven't gotten much of our work done, we have managed to do many other people's. Various folks from around the office have shown up to have us help them with their technical problems, which we usually solve fairly quickly. We joked that we should get transferred to their IT department instead of Web development.

We've been spared most of the brunt of it, but their IT policy is pretty scary. There's a company Internet connection, which routes everything through the IT HQ in Delaware, presumably the better to spy on us on. On Day 1 they took our laptops and "backed up" the drives to ensure they had a copy of all our data. (We scurried to get our MP3 collections and worse off first.)

Then they issued us company-approved laptops: terribly-slow iBook G4s complete with Conde Nast desktop and screensaver with spy software pre-installed. When they gave us the machines we didn't even have administrator access on them. The clock was set to the Eastern time zone; I needed an IT department person to change it to show me California time.

The company laptop is necessary to read our company email which, being on a Microsoft Exchange server, requires a special Microsoft email client to read. You also need to be on a company laptop to access the company network, where you can log into a maze of PeopleSoft web sites to file expense reports and change your health benefits.

I feel wiped after dealing with this non-work for a couple hours, but I can't get any rest from lying on our couch because it too is surrounded by the white noise.

Finally at 5 the office empties out and I can go home where, to compensate for the dullness of the days, I brighten up the nights. Life-threatening bicycle rides, dinners and movies with friends, museums, running along the beach, navigating the nightmare of public transit to visit the new hot spot. And if I get home early there are the roommates eager to chat about their days. By the time I break away it's midnight, if not 3am. I had to spend much of the weekend sleeping just to catch up.

And then it's back to the grind once again. A carousel that never stops to let you get off.