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The blogosphere has begun to chronicle a disturbing phenomenon in offices around the country — endless stretches of uninhabited desks and cubicles where friends and colleagues used to sit.

"I was wandering around the office, as I tend to do when I need to look busy but need a break, and I noticed that we have a lot of empty cubicles around," writes Office Scribe in her *Asleep Under My Desk* blog recently. "... I think we need to start renting these empty cubicles out. I made a crack on my way back from lunch how we need a doctor who can see patients in one of the cubicles."

Even though she's trying to joke about it, Office Scribe admits she's bummed out by the emptiness.

Office Scribe, who didn't want her name used for fear of losing her job as a sales assistant for a major travel company in Chicago, has seen about 60 of her co-workers get the axe since December.

"When the economy tanked, we had two sets of layoffs, and the people we were sitting next to are gone," she says. With so few people left, there are now large swathes of empty cubes between departments. "You have to go searching for people. It's kind of like we have little tribes now."

Alas, Office Scribe may feel lonely, but she's far from alone.

Mass layoffs throughout corporate America have created cubicle and desk graveyards in office buildings from coast to coast. After years of shrinking office space for employees, the recession has brought about a new trend — more room for workers to stretch out.

An ever-growing office void

The average square foot per office occupant has risen to 435 square feet so far this year, from 15 square feet in 2008, according to International Facility Management Association, or IFMA, in a soon-to-be released report.

"There is simply more space per person in the workplace, meaning there are fewer people occupying a greater amount of space, and this is just over the course of a year," says George Deutsch, a spokesperson for the association. "We attribute this to the economic downturn and layoffs our nation is currently dealing with."

It's creating morale problems for employees, not to mention logistical nightmares for companies and the facilities maintenance staff.

Given current economic conditions, the graveyards will likely grow, says Howard Fisher, president of IFMA's Corporate Facilities Council.

"There are differences given the geographic locations and industries," says Fisher, who is also senior manager for facilities services for SAS.

North Carolina, he says, has more high-tech firms and doesn't seem to be as hard hit by layoffs. Thus it has fewer cubicle graveyards than Michigan, which has more industrial companies, and New York, which has more troubled financial firms.

The level of empty space also differs depending on whether a company is able to get out of an existing lease and move to a smaller location or if they're stuck in a long-term lease or own their own building and can't as easily deal with the excess space issue, he says.

Indeed, many companies don't seem to be doing much of anything to deal with the ever-growing office void.

"To some extent, companies are waiting until things stabilize so they can look at their options," says Ilene Gochman, an organization effectiveness expert with consulting firm Watson Wyatt. "People are not sure they have the right size organization yet. They don't want to move people and then have to move them again."

Unfortunately, it's not that easy on those left behind.

"Emotionally, workers look around the empty office, and it brings the depth of the economic crisis home for them in a personal way," says Leslie Seppinni, a clinical psychologist. "They wonder: 'Am I next?' and a tremendous amount of anxiety and depression builds as they try to figure out what steps to take next."

Jon O'Toole, a director of community relations for Boston-based marketing firm BzzAgent Inc., saw the empty desks at his firm as a reminder of co-workers who were recently laid off. "You miss the people you had worked with. It wasn't easy on them, but it also wasn't easy seeing those empty desks every day."

Lucky for O'Toole, the owner of his company actually decided to do something about it.

After 11 people lost their jobs due to downsizing at the end of last year, all the desks were centralized so there were no empty spaces in between workers. But that still left a section of empty cubicles in the office.

CEO Dave Balter felt the empty space distracted from the culture of his company. So he offered the workspaces to budding entrepreneurs in town for free — phones, Internet and receptionist included.

"I had no jobs to offer, but I had space," he says.

While few companies are being proactive, some employees are taking the initiative and doing things to utilize the space better, says Paul Eagle, principal at Perkins+Will, a commercial building architectural firm. "Workers are moving themselves around, trying to collect in villages," he says.

He believes some firms are beginning to see the importance of converting vacant sections into spaces for employees that will boost morale, such as prayer rooms and even nursing areas for new mothers.

Part of the office landscape

For now, though, the graveyards will remain part of the office landscape, especially if workers don't speak up. Even if employees are upset about them, many feel they can't complain because they feel lucky to have their jobs and don't want to rock the boat.

Staying quiet, however, may not be the best idea. Many manager are so wrapped up with other issues from where they sit in their offices with a view of the outside that they may not even think there's a problem, says **Billie Blair, Author of "All the Moving Parts: Organizational Change Management."**

"Workers don't have to be aggressive about it," she says. "Just start a discussion with your immediate supervisor at the water cooler or over coffee."

Tom Vecchione, director of workplace strategy for architecture and design firm Gensler, has some advice for employers as well.

- Test potential office layouts. Watch how employees actually use the space they have. Do they need more conference rooms or more collaboration space, such as informal meeting areas?

- Do what you can to elevate employee mood and productivity by opening up views out of windows; take down cube paneling to allow for maximum natural light; and provide Wi-Fi in the office so employees can spread out, circulate and collaborate.

If managers don't take the initiative, workers may.

Take the Office Scribe.

"I have not heard a peep from anyone in management about the problem with all the empty desks other than to tell us not to bleed into them," she says. "They told us to keep the spaces neat."

Few are heeding this directive.

She and her fellow co-workers have commandeered a cube for their junk, now storing everything from empty boxes to used paper. Empty cubicles are also used for occasional lunch buffets and holiday celebrations.

"If we need to spread out, that's where we go," she says.