

# Office Security

By: Cst. Tom McKay

If you were to engage a security professional in a simple game of word association on the topic of office security, it would likely go something like this:

Reception .....Desk  
Visitor .....Badge  
Access ..... Control  
Work Station..... ?

My point exactly. Despite the proliferation of the office workstation for the better part of the last two decades, the term workstation fails to evoke a security response. As a crime prevention officer and Behavioural Based Design advocate, I believe that an examination of the impact of the workstation on office security is long over due.

When I began my working career some twenty-five years ago, my first office environment was characterized by an open concept where row upon row of desks were arranged. The result was a safe, community-like atmosphere reminiscent of the traditional neighbourhood where I grew up where backdoor neighbours got to know and look out for each other's property as traditional fencing of limited height made this possible. These neighbourhoods, like my first office environment, were inherently safe in nature as everyone benefited from the surveillance provided by the neighbours when they left their homes or they stepped away from their desks. In the more than five years that I worked in such an environment, I had not experienced, nor was aware of, a single incident in which an outsider had entered the office area seeking crime opportunity. The office, quite simply, failed to provide the type of environment that would support that type of behaviour.

Over time, this dramatically changed.

The open environment gave way to prefabricated workstations and the office maze, labyrinth or honeycomb (depending upon your perspective) was born. This created a much more private and insular environment dominated by high partition walls reminiscent of neighbourhoods with a penchant for privacy fences. The end result was a much more anonymous atmosphere where it is difficult to casually observe people and monitor their behaviour.

So how did this happen? Well despite good intentions and the generally accepted benefits -- improved work environment and increased efficiency -- associated with the workstation, it is apparent from the impact on office security that security professionals generally play a marginal role, if any, in the selection and layout of workstations. Had this been the case, I would have expected a much more strategic selection and layout of workstations that would restore a balance between natural surveillance and privacy by strategically lowering partition heights, adding vision panels and strategically orienting reception-like workstations towards key transition points. This would serve to prevent the development of the partition-dominated office I have seen, all too often, where malfeasants feel comfortable and emboldened because opportunities abound. It will also assist management with maintaining a balance between providing their employees with a good working environment and the need for proper supervision.

I have personally worked in an office where the introduction of workstations profoundly compromised this ability. As a result of poor planning, a workstation's high, cabinet partition wall was placed opposite a supervisor's window. Gone was the ability to monitor the entire office from his desk. In its place the supervisor was presented with an extremely limited view of the first office cubicle. This can be problematic from a management perspective, as it is generally accepted that some employees will always require closer supervision than others which could lead to problems over time as some employees might be tempted to take advantage of the situation and use the excessive cover to engage in personal activities or take extended breaks.

All these problems can be readily addressed if, at the planning stage, persons making the purchasing decisions are trained in some basic CPTED techniques and apply these as part of the selection process. In one well designed office environment visited by civilian RCMP security professionals, officials reported feeling as if everyone was watching as they moved about the space thanks to privacy screens that were no more than four feet in height. I therefore believe that it is critically important that management recognize the significant impact that workstations can have on behaviour and security and as such direct those responsible for workstation procurement to have a basic understanding and appreciation

# Office Security

---

for security and CPTED principles. To accomplish this, it will be necessary to evaluate these individual's current level of security training and, where this is found to be lacking, make the necessary adjustments through better training or through a reorganization that would bring the requisite skill set to the task.

Until workstations are given the same security considerations as the development of secure reception areas, visitor sign-in protocols or access control systems, the proliferation of poorly planned workstations may be having an undesired effect on your overall security.