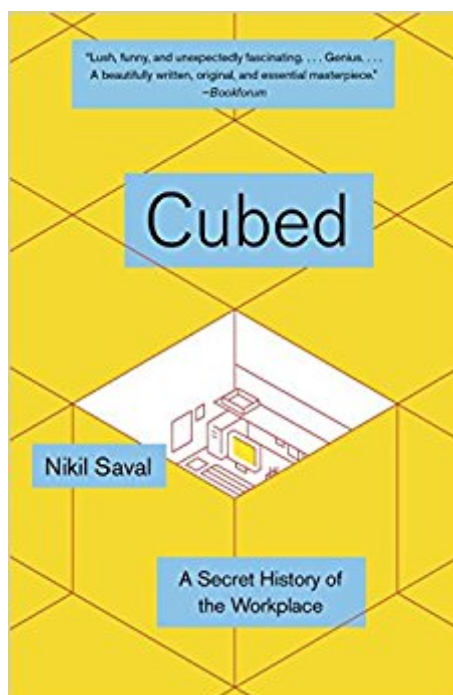


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# Cubed: The Secret History Of The Workplace



## Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book & Daily Beast Best Nonfiction of 2014 & Inc. Magazine's Most Thought-Provoking Books of the Year  
Man is born free, but he is everywhere in cubicles. How did we get from Scrooge's office to Office Space? From bookkeepers in dark countinghouses to freelancers in bright cafes? What would the world be like without the vertical file cabinet? What would the world be like without the office at all? In *Cubed*, Nikil Saval chronicles the evolution of the office in a fascinating, often funny, and sometimes disturbing anatomy of the white-collar world and how it came to be the way it is. Drawing on the history of architecture and business, as well as a host of pop culture artifacts—from *Mad Men* to *Dilbert* (and, yes, *The Office*)—and ranging in time from the earliest clerical houses to the surprisingly utopian origins of the cubicle to the funhouse campuses of Silicon Valley, *Cubed* is an all-encompassing investigation into the way we work, why we do it the way we do (and often don't like it), and how we might do better.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Praise for *Cubed*: "... Excellent ... fresh and intellectually omnivorous ... Saval is a vigorous writer, and a thoughtful one. What puts him above the rank of most nonfiction authors, even some of the better ones, is that he doesn't merely present information. He turns each new fact over in his mind, right in front of you, holding it to the light." —Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*  
*Cubed* is...a pleasure to read: beautifully written and clearly organized. Since many Americans now, women as

well as men, spend more than half their waking hours at work, it's also an important exploration."â "Richard Sennett, The New York Times Book Review"Lush, funny, and unexpectedly fascinating ... [G]enius ...Â CubedÂ stands as one of those books readers can open to any page and find the kind of insight theyâ™ll want to yank strangers out of their bus or subway seats and repeat ...Â [A] beautifully written, original, and essential masterpiece."â "Jerry Stahl, Bookforum"There are a lot of books about work... but Cubed offers something different: an entertaining look at the history of the modern worker that the modern worker can actually learn from."â "Rosecrans Baldwin, NPR"Impressive... Beautifully written... delightfully readable..."Â â "Martin Filler,Â The New York Review of Books"Thorough and diligent...Saval works hard, and effectively, to demonstrate how the evolution of workspaces paralleled social shifts in the workforce that weâ™re still living out....Â SavalÂ is a tireless researcher, and he turns phrases with a flair that would get an Organization Man fired."â "Jennifer Howard, The Washington Post Book World"... Cleverly pieced together...subtle and sophisticated."â "Jill Lepore, The New Yorker"Nikil Saval's new book,Â Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace, is a fascinating guide to the intellectual history of the American office. Part cultural history, part architectural analysis and part management theoryâ™with some labor economics, gender studies and pop culture thrown in for good measureâ™the book is a smart look at the evolution of the place where we spend so much of our lives."â "The Washington Post"In his first book, Saval sets out to chronicle the evolution of the American office from airless prison to what it is today, reflecting upon the transformation of the office worker from emasculated novelty to unremarkable figure of ubiquity. To accomplish this, he synthesizes an impressive number of books, films, articles, and first-person accounts relating to the daunting number of historical forces and ideologies that have shaped white-collar work: architecture, philosophy, labor disputes, class conflict, the womenâ™s movement, and technological advances, just to name a few. Saval considers each of them, forming a cogent and compelling narrative that could very easily have been scattered or deathly dull. To keep things lively, Saval deploys deft analytical skills and a tone thatâ™s frequently bemused, making difficult and important concepts palatable to the casual reader."â "The Boston Globe"Over the past week, as I've been carrying around a copy of Nikil Saval's Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace, I've gotten some quizzical looks. 'It's a history of the office,' I'd explain, whereupon a good number of people would respond, 'Well, that sounds boring.' It isn't. In fact, Cubed is anything but... Saval's book glides smoothly between his two primary subjects: the physical structure of offices and the social institutions of white-collar work over the past 150 years or so. CubedÂ encompasses everything from the rise of the skyscraper to the entrance of women in the workplace to the mid-20th-century angst over

grey-flannel-suit conformity to the dorm-like 'fun' workplaces of Silicon Valley. His stance is skeptical, a welcome approach given that most writings on the contemporary workplace are rife with dubious claims to revolutionary innovation—office design or management gimmicks that bestselling authors indiscriminately pounce on like magpies seizing glittering bits of trash."—Salon.com"Five days a week I commute to a skyscraper in the main business district of a large city and sit at a desk within whispering distance of another desk. Whatever the word 'work' used to conjure, my version is now quite standard. About 40 million Americans make a living in some sort of cubicle. Are we happy about that? The likelihood that we are not is central to Nikil Saval's impressive debut, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*."—The New Republic"... Formidable ... Beautifully rendered ... Sections of the book shine—especially when it discusses gender in the workplace ... The elegance of his prose and the intensity of his moral commitment linger."—The Nation"... *Cubed* is so stimulating, so filled with terrific material and shrewd observations, that it's a must-read for anyone pondering how America arrived at its current state of white-collar under-employment and economic insecurity."—The Daily Beast"...[A] sharp and absorbing history of the office."—The Economist"*Saval's book... stands out as one of the best pop histories to come out in years, and on a topic that most of us (statistically speaking) can relate to.*"—Fast Company"[An] absorbing history of office life...It sits cheerily between the academic and the journalistic register...*Saval's style is nicely spiked with colloquialism... [His] debunking temper serves him well.*"—The Guardian"... An entertaining read ... *Saval's readings of pop culture representations of the office and its workers add a lively and ironic perspective.*"—Publishers Weekly"*Ferociously lucid and witty.*"—Kirkus Reviews"*A sprightly historical tour of the vexed, overplanned world of the modern workplace.*"—In These Times—Marvellous—| in the vein of Barbara Ehrenreich—Saval's brilliant renderings of the Inner Life of the Middle Class—| Saval's accomplishment is to restore the strangeness of the common cube.—Michael Denning, New Left Review"*Part cultural study, part architectural analysis...a fascinating journey through the history of the American office environment from cubicle life with a dress code to Google-fied fun spaces with Fussball tables.*"—Theis Duelund, Los Angeles Magazine—Why did no one write this necessary book before now? Never mind: it wouldn't have been as good. *Cubed* has that combination of inevitability and surprise that marks the best writing—and thinking.—Benjamin Kunkel, author of *Indecision*—Required reading for anyone who works in an office, and for those fortunate enough to have escaped.—Ed Park, author of *Personal Days*—Nikil Saval is a superstar! He does for offices what Foucault did for prisons and hospitals, transforming a seemingly static, purely functional, self-evident institution into a rich human story, full of good and bad intentions, chance, and historical forces. Reading *Cubed* is

like watching an amazing magic trick where the very boringness of the office turns out to be what is the most interesting. I found myself wishing he would do waiting rooms next."âElif Batuman, author of *The Possessed*

Nikil Saval, an editor of *n+1*, lives in Philadelphia.

This is one of those books that ended up getting a good bit of press because it was a novel way of looking at something that is an everyday thing. The way that white collar workers do their work didn't just happen that way, but it was a result of deliberate choices from the architecture of the buildings that the work is done in to the furniture that the workers sit on. I hadn't thought too deeply about it, thinking that the way things are was just a bit like the way things were, only with computers. I was wrong, and Saval tracks the changes, focused on the United States from the industrial revolution on. The white-collar worker has not been devoid of the standardization and alienation that the blue-collar worker had and rebelled against. The white-collar worker just never saw their white-collar chains; instead, they looked up, hoping to move up the ladder (no matter how false that metaphor is or was). The potential for striving has, writ large, been the barrier to class to recognition of the white-collar worker for generations. The lack of upward mobility except for into the white-collar ranks is what led to unionism and workers improving their lots. The myth of upward mobility in white-collar terms is a form of social control that is not readily seen. Saval tracks this, and it makes me think if this has been a deliberate move. As production has been mechanized, there are fewer production workers and more support staff in ancillary roles to production. As more workers move out of production and the workforce is more and more professionalized, white-collar membership is the mass of workers. It is the cube that keeps them apart and alienated. Maybe it is a prison of sorts. Me? I'm not part of this at all. My office has a door.

Interesting read, but the author goes off on difficult to follow tangents from time to time. Saval's choice of words can be a bit obtuse. If I wasn't currently a college student accustomed to reading academic literature, I would have found this book unmanageable at times. Regardless, interesting content overall.

*Cubed* is really about people, their motivations, their successes and failures. It spends a lot of pages on why people, both men and women, wanted to become white-collar workers and how they coped

with the office landscapes that organizations built for their employees. Read this book and you will never look fondly at any skyscraper of any vintage with admiration again, for in one way or another too many offices were, and too often still are, dehumanizing. Saval ranges widely. The author is well read on a large variety of subjects that are important to his overall discussion. He

Heard an interview of Nikil Saval on 7th Avenue Project and knew I HAD to check this book out. I was NOT disappointed. It's a fascinating accounting on the evolution of the office, its design, and the varied influences (social, economic, etc.) that cross-pollinated to get where we are today. Excellent treatment, especially on design elements and open-concept (open-source) workspace. Kudos!

Nikil provides a wonderful narrative examining management philosophy, architecture and design, and culture over time. As a business school professor I appreciated learning more about how important the physical environment of the office is to the organizational culture that emerges, and visa versa.

I'm incredibly frustrated with this book. the story the author is trying to tell has the potential to be so incredibly compelling. I love the concept of it. However, the writing is disorganized and very difficult to follow - overall fairly inaccessible to the everyday reader. It almost reads like an academic white paper at times. I feel like the author is trying too hard to sound scholarly by using flowery, excessive prose instead of communicating his POV clearly and succinctly. A single paragraph can go back and forth between his own thoughts and quotations or citations making it very difficult to follow. I gave up after 90 pages. I don't want to work this hard while reading a book for leisure.

A good history of a subject that I would not have originally thought would be so interesting. It is more than just about the office cubicle. It is about the history of office work, city architecture, labor relations, changing business structure and much more. If like me you have spent much of your working career in an office cubicle, you will find much to relate to.

Great use of both accessible and entertaining examples, primary research , and secondary sources. The historical overview of white collar work was a phenomenal addition, as well as the analysis of power and class in the design and functioning of white collar workplaces

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