

Turning Up the Heat

While the nation shivers through another blast of cold weather, a new survey finds that the office thermostat plays an integral role in controlling employee productivity levels. But can turning up the heat really increase productivity?

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As large swaths of the nation suffer through plunging temperatures and snowy conditions, a new survey by Chicago-based job board Careerbuilder.com finds that the temperature inside an office can influence just how productive an employee feels he or she can be. Nearly one-quarter (22 percent) of 4,285 full-time workers surveyed said that, when an office is "too hot," it's difficult to concentrate, while another 11 percent said when the office is "too cold," it's just as distracting.

And, in fact, 27 percent of the workers said their current workplace was "too hot," while 19 percent described their office as "too cold." It's such a hot-button issue that union workers at New York Public Library system even have a clause written in their contract to allow them to earn compensatory time off when the temperature drops below 68 degrees in the library, according to a recent story in the *New York Times*.

Debate over office temperatures will probably come as no surprise to most HR professionals, as complaints about "too cold" or "too hot" environments ranked as the No. 1 and No. 2, respectively, office complaints in a poll by the International Facility Management Association, says Glenn Friedman, principal of Taylor Engineering in Alameda, Calif.

That debate led about 10 percent of the workers surveyed by Careerbuilder to respond that they have fought with co-workers over the office temperature. Rosemary Haefner, Careerbuilder.com's vice president of human resources, suggests HR take the lead in seeking reconciliation.

When there is disagreement, Haefner says, HR could send an e-mail to the affected staff in order to directly discuss a compromise on temperature with colleagues so that workers and employers can come together to find a workaround to the thorny issue of the right temperature.

But even an offer to compromise won't always make everyone happy, Friedman says. "For typical comfort conditions, five percent of occupants will be dissatisfied," he says.

He also notes that "complaints occur even with perfect temperature control. If individual occupant control is not justified, do not expect every occupant to be satisfied with the same conditions," according to research reported in the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-conditioning Engineers' journal, *Transactions*.

James Lee, founder of the Los Angeles-based consultancy Lee Strategy Group Inc., says that new "green standards" could affect the temperature conversation in the future. Part of the planning that goes into most traditional, centralized, climate-controlled

buildings is the belief that making specific and small changes in temperature for smaller square footages raises the cost of system tremendously, he says.

"Thus, you would get one thermostat for four or five offices, and if that thermostat was set on the wall where someone decided to park a busy printer, the heat from it would cause everyone to shiver," he says. "So, as a result, with new green building systems being designed, temperature control becomes more of a building-wide design and [is thus] managed from that view, i.e., [of] using greenery and water displays to regulate temperatures," he says.

"The upside to all this was the reduction in wider variances in temperature in specific parts of the building. This reduces energy costs and keeps people's tempers cooler."

Lee says that, instead of focusing on the setting of the thermostat in the office, more companies "will be focused on the energy policies and systems in the building they move into or design. That will hopefully help mitigate this nettlesome problem."

But at least one workplace expert isn't holding much hope out for a peaceable resolution to the age-old question of what the right temperature should be in an office.

"This is not a solvable issue, sorry to say," says David Lewis, president of Operations Inc., a human resource outsourcing and consulting agency based in Stamford, Conn. Most companies, he says, leave the temperature settings up to the facilities departments, because "HR figured out a long time ago that they, out of all departments, do not want to control this, of all issues."

He notes that the warmer it is in an office, "the sleepier people tend to get, regardless of ... thermostat. I would be more concerned about productivity than about the complaints I will field about it being too cold."

He advises companies to hand out space heaters and blanket, if necessary, in order to keep as many people as possible happy and warm (or cool, as the case may be.)

But Lewis is convinced that a peaceful solution to the thermostat question is nowhere in sight. "If my wife and I battle over the temperature in my house, and we chose each other as mates, how can you expect co-workers to agree on whether 68 or 74 is the right setting on the thermostat?" he asks.