

Globe and Mail, August 6, 2007

THE OFFICE: A WEEKLY LOOK AT WORK CULTURE

How to cool a heated thermostat battle

CRAIG SILVERMAN

Every weekday just before 6 p.m., Leigh Lampert begins his rush to get out of the office.

Mr. Lampert, a Toronto immigration lawyer, isn't necessarily done work for the day. He just can't stand the heat that begins slowly building when the air conditioning in his office shuts off at 6 during the summer months.

"I know it's on everyone's mind [in the office]," he says. "People can't avoid thinking about it."

By contrast, Aalia Persaud, a Montreal freelance writer, spent several years as an executive assistant in a building that never seemed warm enough.

"All the women were cold all the time," she says. "We all had sweaters that stayed in the office ... except for a few women going through menopause. They were sitting under the ventilators cooling off."

The sweltering summer months often give rise to temperature battles in the office. What seems like a freezer to one worker feels like a sauna to another. Men typically turn the thermostat down, while women turn it up. It's enough to drive co-workers, office managers and "comfort" professionals mad.

"It can rile people up," says Warren Heeley, president of the Heating, Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Institute of Canada, a trade association. "Depending on how serious or critical the heating or cooling problem is, it can cause productivity problems."

A 2006 survey of 1,500 British workers by temp agency Office Angels revealed that 81 per cent of workers find it harder to concentrate when an office is warmer than usual. Almost one-fifth said there had been a temperature-related confrontation in their office.

To avoid conflicts and health problems, the Saskatchewan Labour Department created an online guide, Thermal Comfort in Offices and Retail Outlets, that lists appropriate office temperatures and the physical and mental effects of improper heating and cooling.

Mr. Heeley says most modern offices lock thermostats to prevent workers from fiddling with them.

Some even go so far as to install fake thermostats. Workers enjoy a placebo effect of thinking they control the temperature, and building managers get some respite from temp-tantrums.

"I've seen them, but I've never installed [fake thermostats]," says Stewart Creaser, president of Halifax Heating and Air Conditioning. His staff is often called to offices where temperature causes tempers to boil over.

"We call them nuisance calls because we're not fixing anything, we're just adjusting," he says.

Ms. Persaud says her old office featured a frustrating hybrid - a locked, dummy thermostat.

"There was a lock on the thermostat and only one person was allowed to fiddle with it," she recalls. "But then we found out it wasn't making a difference."

How cold.