



mike gruss

I HAVE SEEN THE OFFICE OF THE FUTURE, AND IT'S IN CHESAPEAKE

FROM WHERE she stands at the front door of Creative in Chesapeake, Trisha could be a robot.

Her torso is a desk. A stack of outgoing envelopes the size of thank-you notes sits on her lap. Her head is a giant flat-screen television. A Web cam could pass for a funny-looking hat.

But on the screen is her face. Human eyes, human ears, human hair, human neck, human shoulders.

She is looking at me looking at her. On screen,

"Welcome to Creative," her human voice says.

She is not a robot. She is human. When she starts talking, visitors often act as though they've heard the great voice of Oz. Where is that coming from?

Trisha has been here more than 2½ years, and by here I mean - well, it's complicated.

Trisha is based 105 miles away in Ashland. She is the administrator for three of-

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fices. She can see all their lobbies via Web cam. She greets customers. She smiles at them. When she is away from her desk, you see her empty chair in Ashland. On the screen. In Chesapeake.

I'm here to see Carl Hooper, I say. It feels as though I'm shouting into an advanced drive-through machine.

Hooper, Creative's vice president, walks over.

In the next 75 minutes, he and his colleagues will describe their office, the worklab, as the "anti-Dilbertville" at least four times. He's going to show me what the office of the future looks like, a stark contrast from most offices today, which have all the appeal of a basement cubbyhole.

To start, of course, I've already met Trisha.

To find the Creative worklab, a pedestrian-looking warehouse in Chesapeake, you drive past an office for American Honda Motor Co. and past dozens and dozens of trucks, and through an industrial business park that looks like every other business park in America.

You do not have to go in those buildings to tell they are Dilbert warehouses. Dilbert offices. Earth tones. Slate. Carpet five years

too old. Cubicles. Security cameras in the breakroom to make sure no one steals someone else's yogurt.

I work in manila. Chances are, you work in manila, too.

Creative's workplace is nothing like yours.

Employees can sit where they want. (About a third of the people choose the same desk every day.) Some desks allow workers to stand.

When they get the afternoon blues, when the caffeine wears off, they can use the desk with a built-in treadmill. (Max speed: 2 miles per hour.)

Employees can work from home one day a week, just not on Wednesdays. Meetings are on Wednesdays, and Creative's leaders believe in a sense of belonging.

Huge flat-screen televisions advertise employee birthdays, new babies and the sales made this week. More belonging.

Natural light is never far away. Hooper says the eye, tired from computer screens, prefers a view where it can focus on an item more than 200 feet away.

The cubicle walls are low. The carpet is new. The chairs are dynamic and from a showroom, not stained or crusted with fruit bars that passed for lunch. The walls have color. The place has personality.

Even the air seems a little cooler and easier to breathe.

I am sitting with Hooper and Creative's CEO Bob DeLille around one of the hippest tables I've ever sat at, one that's equipped with a giant television and six jacks for laptops. In the middle of the interview, Hooper asks me how I'm taking notes. He's interested in this sort of thing.

His notes are on standard notebook paper, scanned and stored as PDF files in the Internet cloud, accessible anywhere. DeLille takes

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notes on his iPad, even though the keyboard is a little small.

I am taking notes with an EXP 0.7 pen in an Ampad Reporter's Notebook with 70 sheets of paper, a notebook I am very particular about, and suddenly I realize why I am out of place.

I'm acting like a character in "Dilbert."

At its core, in the most boring terms possible, Creative is a company that sells modular walls, flooring, office furniture and audio-visual equipment.

But what the company represents is the idea that work doesn't have to be, well, quite so much work. It doesn't need to feel like a Communist-era factory. Productivity is important, but it is not exclusive from comfort and frills. Creative wants to make things easier and boost productivity.

Some potential customers are taken aback by Creative's approach. They say it would never work in their office.

"It starts with a culture shift," Hooper tells them.

I asked Hooper and DeLille how often they think about redoing their own office.

Every day, DeLille said. Five minutes before you got here.

The odd thing about Dilbert is that everyone laughs along. We laugh at the office politics and the angry memos and then do nothing to change.

Hooper makes me an offer. I can work from Creative's office for a day if I want. People do it all the time. Besides, it helps them learn how others work.

As I leave, I can see that Trisha is away from her desk, and I can see the future and it looks so comfortable, so inspiring and so far away.

Hooper's offer is tempting, but the next day, I am back in my office. Standard desk. Beige phone. Gray computer. Dirty carpet. Everything else: tones of off-white.

I decide I need to hang a new poster.

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