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Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace

Nikil Saval
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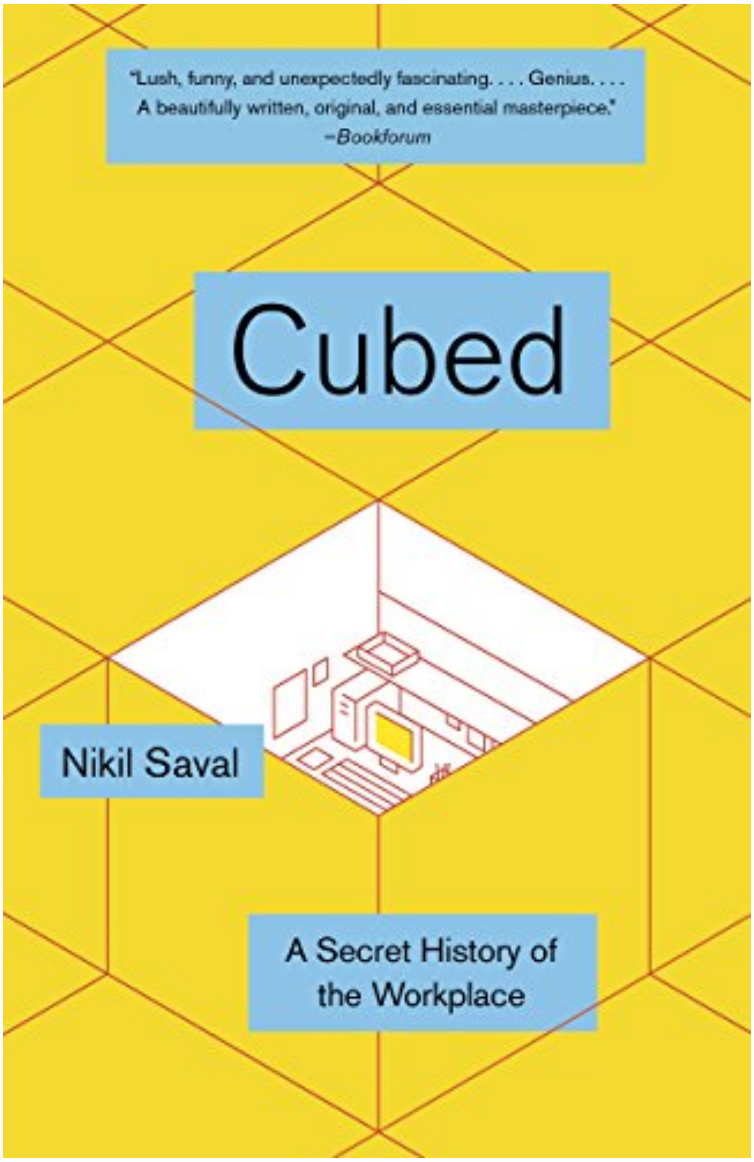

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Nikil Saval : Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Novel History of the Place of WorkBy J. Edgar Mihelic, MBAThis 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 didnrsquo;t just happen that way, but it was a result of deliberate choices ndash; from the architecture of the buildings that the work is done in to the furniture that the workers sit on. I hadnrsquo;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?Irsquo;m not part of this at all.My office has a door.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Interesting read, but the author goes off on difficult ...By Seamike79Interesting 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.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. more than met the eyeBy mkdelmarCubed 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

You mean this place we go to five days a week has a history? Cubed reveals the unexplored yet surprising story of the places where most of the world's workmdash;our workmdash;gets done. From "Bartleby the Scrivener" to The Office, from the steno pool to the open-plan cubicle farm, Cubed is a fascinating, often funny, and sometimes disturbing anatomy of the white-collar world and how it came to be the way it ismdash;and what it might become.In the mid-nineteenth century clerks worked in small, dank spaces called ldquo;counting-houses.rdquo; These were all-male enclaves, where work was just paperwork. Most Americans considered clerks to be questionable dandies, who didnrsquo;t do ldquo;real work.rdquo; But the joke was on them: as the great historical shifts from agricultural to industrial economies took place, and then from industrial to information economies, the organization of the workplace evolved along with themmdash;and the clerks took over. Offices became rationalized, designed for both greater efficiency in the accomplishments of clerical work and the enhancement of worker productivity. Women entered the office by the millions, and revolutionized the social world from within. Skyscrapers filled with office space came to tower over cities everywhere. Cubed opens our eyes to what is a truly "secret history" of changes so obvious and ubiquitous that we've hardly noticed them. From the wood-paneled executive suite to the advent of the cubicles where 60% of Americans now work (and 93% of them dislike it) to a not-too-distant future where we might work anywhere at any time (and perhaps all the time), Cubed excavates from popular books, movies, comic strips (Dilbert!), and a vast amount of management literature and business history, the reasons why our workplaces are the way they aremdash;and how they might be better.

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 doesnrsquo;t merely present information. He turns each new fact over in his mind, right in front of you, holding it to the light."mdash;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."mdash;Richard Sennett, The New York Times Book "Lush, funny, and unexpectedly fascinating ... [G]enius ...nbsp;Cubednbsp;stands as one of those books readers can open to any page and find the kind of insight theyrsquo;ll want to yank strangers out of their bus or subway seats and repeat ...nbsp;[A] beautifully written, original, and essential masterpiece."mdash;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."mdash;Rosecrans Baldwin, NPR"Impressive... Beautifully written... delightfully readable..."nbsp;mdash;Martin Filler,nbsp;The New York of Books"Thorough and diligent...Saval works hard, and effectively, to demonstrate how the evolution of workspaces paralleled social shifts in the workforce that wersquo;re still living out....nbsp;Savalnbsp;is a tireless researcher, and he turns phrases with a flair that would get an Organization Man fired."mdash;Jennifer Howard, The Washington Post Book World"... Cleverly pieced together...subtle and sophisticated."mdash;Jill Lepore, The New Yorker"Nikil Saval's new book,nbsp;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 theorymdash;with some labor economics, gender studies and pop

culture thrown in for good measuremdash;the book is a smart look at the evolution of the place where we spend so much of our lives."mdash;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 womenrsquo;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 thatrsquo;s frequently bemused, making difficult and important concepts palatable to the casual reader."mdash;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. Cubednbsp;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 innovationmdash;office design or management gimmicks that bestselling authors indiscriminately pounce on like magpies seizing glittering bits of trash."mdash;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."mdash;The New Republic"... Formidable ... Beautifully rendered ... Sections of the book shinemdash;especially when it discusses gender in the workplace ... The elegance of his prose and the intensity of his moral commitment linger."mdash;The Nation"... Cubed is so stimulating, so filled with terrific material and shrewd observations, that itrsquo;s a must-read for anyone pondering how America arrived at its current state of white-collar under-employment and economic insecurity."mdash;The Daily Beast"...[A] sharp and absorbing history of the office."mdash;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."mdash;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."mdash;The Guardian"... An entertaining read ... Saval's readings of pop culture representations of the office and its workers add a lively and ironic perspective."mdash;Publishers Weekly"Ferociously lucid and witty."mdash;Kirkus s"A sprightly historical tour of the vexed, overplanned world of the modern workplace."mdash;In These Timesldquo;Why did no one write this necessary book before now? Never mind: it wouldnrsquo;t have been as good. Cubed has that combination of inevitability and surprise that marks the best writingmdash;and thinking.rdquo;mdash;Benjamin Kunkel, author of Indecisionnbsp;ldquo;Required reading for anyone who works in an office, and for those fortunate enough to have escaped.rdquo;mdash;Ed Park, author of Personal Daysnbsp;"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."mdash;Elif Batuman, author of The PossessedAbout the AuthorNikil Saval is an editor of n+1. He lives in Philadelphia. This is his first book. His first two real jobs were as an editorial assistant in publishing companiesmdash;in cubicles.Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Excerpted from the Hardcover Edition1The Clerking ClassThe torn coat sleeve to the table. The steel pen to the ink. Write! Write! Be it truth or fable. Words! Words! Clerks never think.mdash;Benjamin Browne Foster, Down East Diary (1849)They labored in poorly lit, smoky single rooms, attached to merchants and lawyers, to insurance concerns and banks. They had sharp penmanship and bad eyes, extravagant clothes but shrunken, unused bodies, backs cramped from poor posture, fingers callused by constant writing. When they were not thin, angular, and sallow, they were ruddy and soft; their paunches sagged onto their thighs.Clerks were once a rare subject in literature. Their lives were considered unworthy of comment, their workplaces hemmed in and small, their work indescribably dull. And yet one of the greatest of short stories is about a clerk. In ldquo;Bartleby, the Scrivenerrdquo; (1853), Herman Melville, who had become famous for writing memoirs and novels about spectacular sea voyages to exotic islandsmdash;gaining a readership he eventually lost with that strange, long book about a whaling voyagemdash;decided to turn inward, to the snug, suffocating world of the office. The titanic hunt for the white whale was exchanged for the hunt for the right-sized pen. And for finding the right position to sit at a desk: ldquo;If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up towards his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk, then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now

he lowered the table to his waistbands, and stooped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back.rdquo;Melville himself had worked as a clerk for a merchant in Hawaii before hemdash;as Ishmael put itmdash;took to the ship. He knew from the inside the peculiar emptiness that office work could often have, its atmosphere of purposeless labor and dead-endedness. Even in Moby-Dick he speaks of the thousands in Manhattan who idle along the Battery, lost in ldquo;sea-reverie,rdquo; avoiding returning to their work lives ldquo;pent up in lath and plastermdash;tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks.rdquo; Appropriately, the few windows in the Bartleby office look out onto nothing but more walls. ldquo;On one end,rdquo; the unnamed narrator writes, the window faced ldquo;the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom.rdquo; And on the other side, ldquo;an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade.rdquo; This wall, the narrator adds, wryly, ldquo;required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed to within ten feet of my window panes.rdquo; On two sides, then, two walls: one, the white wall of the light shaft; the other, a soot-black brick wall hemming in vision and light. A walled-in window: a room with no view.But the office of ldquo;Bartleby,rdquo; like the Pequod of Ishmael and Ahab, is also a place of male bonding, cheery with camaraderie and bonhomie. The narrator, a lawyer, initially employs three clerks with absurd nicknamesmdash;Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nutmdash;that he uses affectionately. Each of them behaves with exact predictability the same way every day; for example, Turkey, an old man, always ceases to get work done after his noontime dinner, which he takes with an inordinate quantity of wine, causing his face to ldquo;blaze like a grate full of Christmas coals.rdquo; But the boss is too kind to do anything Trump-like, and the distempered workers never challenge their boss.The entire order dissolves, however, when a sudden increase in the volume of business pushes the narrator into hiring a new scrivenermdash;the eponymous Bartleby. He arrives looking ldquo;pallidly neat, pitiably respectable,rdquo; and, mysteriously enough, ldquo;incurably forlorn.rdquo; The narrator gives him a desk next to a window, but like the other windows it offers little to look at, ldquo;having originally afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though,rdquo; the narrator concedes, ldquo;it gave some light.rdquo;At first Bartleby works diligently, his thinness inversely proportional to his ravenousness for writing: ldquo;As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on, silently, palely, mechanically.rdquo; The trouble comes when this routine is interrupted. The lawyer-narrator calls Bartleby in for assistance in comparing two copies of a document. After outlining the duty, the narrator is stunned by Bartlebyrsquo;s infamous replymdash;ldquo;I would prefer not to.rdquo; Repeating the maddening phrase at the narratorrsquo;s every spluttering attempt to get him to work, Bartleby plunges the calm predictability of the office into thunderous irregularity. In the end, the lawyer, baffled by Bartlebyrsquo;s intransigence, his passive resistance, is forced to leave his office altogether; Bartleby himself is taken off to prison, where, bereft of his sustenance of documents, he starves to death.What ldquo;Bartlebyrdquo; means has been a subject of endless debate. Office workers have always taken it to be a mirror of their condition, with Bartlebyrsquo;s ldquo;I would prefer not tordquo; an encapsulation of how the office reduces all titanic conflicts to petty grievances and simmering resentments. But in 1853, when the story was written, the term ldquo;officerdquo;mdash;and the sort of labor that was performed theremdash;had nowhere near the universal significance it has now. In those tense years before the Civil War, clerks were a small but unusual phenomenon, a subject of anxious scrutiny; their workplaces were at once significant centers of American business and breeding grounds for a kind of work that nobody recognized as work. Clerks were a kind of worker that seemed, like Bartleby, at once harmless and ominous. ldquo;Bartlebyrdquo; was evidence that the office had just begun to blot its inky mark on the consciousness of the world.When does the office begin? Itrsquo;s a question without an easy answer. One can associate the origins with the beginning of paperwork itselfmdash;until recently, the most common mental association with office work (think of the derogatory phrase ldquo;paper pusherrdquo;). In other words, since the invention of writing and the corresponding ability to keep records in a systematic manner, there have always been places that resemble offices: monasteries, libraries, scholarsrsquo; studies. Banking furnished an especially large amount of paperwork; the Uffizi, an incomparable gallery of Renaissance art in Florence, was also one of the first office buildingsmdash;the bookkeeping offices of the Medici familyrsquo;s groundbreaking financial operations. Clerks, too, have existed for ages, many of them unclinching themselves from their desks to become quite famous: from Samuel Pepys, the British government diarist who reported on the gossipy world of seventeenth-century England, to Alexander Hamilton, who had cut his teeth as a merchantsrsquo; clerk before he became the first secretary of the Treasury of the United States; Benjamin Franklin, paragon of pecuniary restraint and bourgeois self-abnegation, started out as a dry goods clerk in 1727. Perhaps some of the tediousness of Franklinrsquo;s own writing was honed in the conditions of his first job: since clerks have had the opportunity to keep diaries, they have bemoaned the sheer boredom of their tasksmdash;the endless copying, the awkward postures, the meaninglessness of their work. When not doing writing for the job, clerks have cultivated the habit of writing about the jobmdash;or literally around it, as in the case of some infamous marginalia from medieval scribes. ldquo;Writing is excessive drudgery,rdquo; one such jotting reads. ldquo;It crooks your back, it dims your

sight, it twists your stomach and your sides.rdquo; ldquo;Oh, my hand,rdquo; goes anothermdash;even though writing out that sentence would have only magnified the problem it described.The notion of the office as the quintessential location of alienated work, or simple drudgery, is far from the etymological root of the word. ldquo;Officerdquo; itself comes from the Latin for ldquo;duty.rdquo; One of the more famous philosophical works of Cicero, long-winded scold of the latter days of the Roman Republic, is a treatise called De officiis, usually translated as ldquo;Of Dutyrdquo; or ldquo;On Duty,rdquo; though it might just as well be ldquo;Of Office.rdquo; For Cicerorsquo;s understanding of duty isnrsquo;t far from our contemporary sense of ldquo;holding officerdquo; or the ldquo;office of the presidentrdquo;: ldquo;officerdquo; as connoting a specific set of responsibilities. For Cicero, ldquo;officerdquo; was what was proper to you, what fitted you as your natural duty. This, too, seems far from any understanding of the office as workplace: few people have ever considered office work to be natural, proper, or fitting.To find the emergence of the office in historymdash;the workplace that prefigures the offices of todaymdash;one has to look at a peculiar confluence of new sorts of buildings, deep economic changes, as well as (most slippery of all) new kinds of feelings and mass awareness of one another among particular strata of the workforce. Industrialization in Britain and America was producing more and more administrative work, and alongside it a need for a rational approach to managing accounts, bills, ledgers: in short, paperwork. Rising to take these positions were clerks, who, looking around, began to see themselves growing in number, and to feel themselves as belonging vaguely to a special group. One finds the evolution of the office coinciding, then, with a change in the position of the clerks themselvesmdash;a new restiveness on their part, a new sense of power. They were not quite sure of themselves, but they were no longer isolated. By the middle of the nineteenth century, clerks and their workplaces begin to appear with a new regularity in the literature and journalism. ldquo;Bartleby,rdquo; with its simultaneously assertive and retiring protagonist, nicely captures this ambivalence in the early world of the office.What ldquo;Bartlebyrdquo; also captured, as other descriptions of office life at the time did, was the sense that office work was unnatural. In a world in which shipping and farming, building and assembling, were the order of work, the early clerical worker didnrsquo;t seem to fit. The office clerk in America at the high noon of the nineteenth century was a curious creature, an unfamiliar figure, an inexplicable phenomenon. Even by 1880, less than 5 percent of the total workforce, or 186,000 people, was in the clerical profession, but in cities, where the nationrsquo;s commentariat was concentrated (who themselves tended to work in office-like places), clerks had become the fastest-growing population. In some heavily mercantile cities, such as New York, they had already become ubiquitous: the 1855 census recorded clerks as the cityrsquo;s third largest occupational group, just behind servants and laborers.For many, this was a terrible development. Nothing about clerical labor was congenial to the way most Americans thought of work. Clerks didnrsquo;t work the land, lay railroad tracks, make ammunitions in factories, let alone hide away in a cabin by a small pond to raise beans and live deep. Unlike farming or factory work, office work didnrsquo;t produce anything. At best, it seemed to reproduce things. Clerks copied endlessly, bookkeepers added up numbers to create more numbers, and insurance men literally made more paper. For the tobacco farmer or miner, it barely constituted work at all. He (and at that point it was invariably a he) was a parasite on the work of others, who literally did the heavy lifting. Thus the bodies of real workers were sinewy, tanned by the relentless sun or blackened by smokestack soot; the bodies of clerks were slim, almost feminine in their untested delicacy.The lively (and unscrupulous) American press occasionally took time to level invectives against the clerk. ldquo;We venture the assertion that there is not a more dependent or subservient set of men in this country than are the genteel, dry goods clerks in this and other large cities,rdquo; the editors of the American Whig held. Meanwhile, the American Phrenological Journal had stronger advice for young men facing the prospect of a clerical career. ldquo;Be men, therefore, and with true courage and manliness dash into the wilderness with your axe and make an opening for the sunlight and for an independent home.rdquo; Vanity Fair had the strongest language of all: clerks were ldquo;vain, mean, selfish, greedy, sensual and sly, talkative and cowardlyrdquo; and spent all their minimal strength attempting to dress better than ldquo;real men who did real work.rdquo; Somehow it was never questioned that journalism, also conducted in offices and with pen and paper, constituted ldquo;real work.rdquo;Clerksrsquo; attire was a glaring target for the barbs of the press, since the very concept of business attire (not to speak of business casual) came into being with the mass appearance of clerks in American cities. ldquo;In the counting-room and the office,rdquo; wrote Samuel Wells, the author of a ldquo;manual of republican etiquetterdquo; from 1856, ldquo;gentlemen wear frock coats or sack coats. They need not be of very fine material, and should not be of any garish pattern.rdquo; Other fashion advisers pointed to a whole host of ldquo;business coats,rdquo; ldquo;business surtouts,rdquo; and ldquo;business paletots,rdquo; which you could find at new stores like Brooks Brothers. Working-class Americans would be seen in straw hats or green blouses; what distinguished the clerk was his collar: usually bleached an immaculate white and starched into an imposing stiffness. But collared business shirts were expensive, so stores catering to the business customer began to sell collars by themselves, half a dozen collars running to under half of what a cheap shirt would cost. The white collar, detachable and yet an essential status marker, was the perfect symbol of the pseudo-genteel, dual nature of office work.The self-regarding clerk in his white collar became a stock subject of satire. Edgar Allan Poe, in his story ldquo;The Man of the Crowd,rdquo; saw the ldquo;tribe of clerksrdquo; as being composed entirely of overdressed dandies, imitating aristocratic styles already several years old:There were the junior clerks of flash

housesmdash;young gentlemen with tight coats, bright boots, well-oiled hair, and supercilious lips. Setting aside a certain dapperness of carriage, which may be termed deskism for want of a better word, the manner of these persons seemed to me an exact fac-simile of what had been the perfection of bon ton about twelve or eighteen months before. They wore the cast-off graces of the gentry;mdash;and this, I believe, involves the best definition of the class.The division of the upper clerks of staunch firms, or of the ldquo;steady old fellows,rdquo; it was not possible to mistake. These were known by their coats and pantaloons of black or brown, made to sit comfortably, with cravats and waistcoats, broad solid-looking shoes, and thick hose or gaiters.mdash;They all had slightly bald heads, from which the right ears, long used to pen-holding, had an odd habit of standing off on end. I observed that they always removed or settled their hats with both hands, and wore watches, with short gold chains of a substantial and ancient pattern. Theirs was the affectation of respectability;mdash;if indeed there be an affectation so honorable.