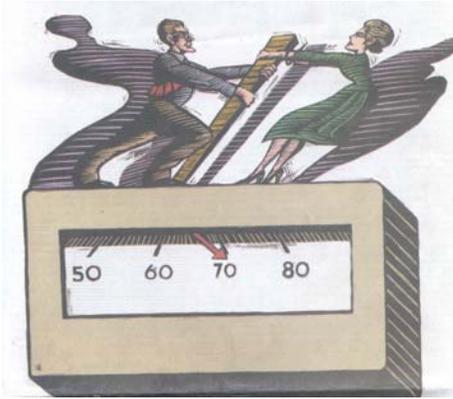


## Degrees of separation

The office thermostat can create heated battles - and frosty relations  
By MICHAEL PRECKER Staff Writer, Dallas Morning News  
Published September 3, 2002



Angela Palmer-Vaughn, an office manager at a Dallas engineering firm, has a solution to how to work through these beastly Texas summers. Attached to her desk, helping to keep her comfortable as the temperature outside flirts with triple digits is a heater. "I don't like to be cold," Ms. Palmer-Vaughn says. "I'd rather be too warm than too cold any day."

She's too cold, of course, because the air conditioning is running too strong for her taste. The trouble is that there are four people in her work area: two who vote for warm and two who vote for cool. "We just go back and forth all day," Ms. Palmer-Vaughn says. "Turn it down, turn it up. The boss doesn't get involved. "The boss was considerate enough to buy radiating heat panels for Ms. Palmer-Vaughn's desk for when she gets too chilly. But one of her colleagues complains anonymously that because of those panels, "The rest of us in cubicles around her are constantly hot even with the air on. ... It is a constant state of aggravation." And so it goes in offices just about everywhere, as co-workers struggle over the thermostat that controls the space they must share.

"People have different temperature gauges on them," says Scott Harrison, director of TXU Energy Solutions, which manages building environments and advises companies on the subject. "I'm comfortable at 80 degrees, but somebody else needs it to be 65." Modern heating and cooling systems have come a long way toward satisfying different temperature needs in the same workspace, Mr. Harrison says. "You can vary the comfort levels, but if they're all sitting together, that won't be good enough."

The result, says George Giles, managing principal at the Right Management Consultants office in Dallas, is that "everybody can't be totally happy. Everybody has to give a little." And why is that? It's a metabolism thing. It's a male-female thing. It's an engineering thing. It's a winter thing, too, because the same problem works in reverse when the heat is turned up too high in January. A lot of people weighing in on this topic don't want to be quoted by name, lest they exacerbate an already touchy situation at the office. Here's an unscientific sampling of opinion that seems pretty representative:

"Pretty much everyone here has an opinion about our thermostat," one man says. "The way I see it, they can either put on a sweater or I can take off my shirt and walk around topless." "I literally have to wear the opposite seasonal wardrobes, summer clothes in winter and winter clothes in summer," a woman complains. "It is a constant topic of conversation." "I find it quite chilly if not freezing," a woman says of her downtown office. "The rulers of the ambient temperature are the menopausal women in the office. I wear wool. Who really wants to confront these ladies? Not me. Although it is hard to type in mittens." "Everyone that I work with likes to have their offices cold, except for me," a woman says. "So I was always stuck wearing sweaters over my summer clothes. Finally, a couple of weeks ago I decided to close my air vent in my office. Now, my office is just right. Also, a big plus is that my co-workers stay out of my office since it is warm."

Leann Lawrence, a Dallas woman who processes mortgage loans, says the cold air at her office blew her right out the door. "It was absolutely freezing," she says. "You had to literally wear two

or three layers to work there. If you forgot your sweater, you were in big trouble. "Then you walk out the door at 5 o'clock and it's 100 degrees. You've got all these darned clothes on, and you're miserable." When she recently got the chance to start her own business processing loans from home, the prospect of setting her own thermostat was a big factor in her decision. "It's 72 in my house right now," she reports. "I'm in summer clothes - cutoff pants and sandals. I'm so glad I left."

Dave Yohe, a building engineer who has handled complaints like these for years, has a solution that may surprise you: dummy thermostats, decorating the wall and hooked up to nothing. "That's been a trick of the trade for years," says Mr. Yohe, who used to supervise buildings in Dallas but now works in Salt Lake City. "If you're getting complaints, stick up a fake thermostat." Mr. Yohe, who serves about 750 people in a three-story office building, takes his job seriously and responds to everybody who gripes. He realizes that people have different comfort levels and tries to make adjustments as he monitors air quality and maintains a constant temperature. But sometimes, he says, just fiddling with a useless switch makes people feel better. "Unless they take it off the wall, which I don't think they will, nobody will know," he says. "And nine times out of 10, it eliminates your problems."

Daniel Int-Hout studied temperature issues for years as chairman of the Thermal Comfort Committee of the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers. He's not unfamiliar with phony thermostats - "We call them placebostats," he says - but says they won't work forever. "People figure it out sooner or later," says Mr. Int-Hout, the chief engineer at Krueger, a Richardson company that manufactures air-distribution systems. Instead, he has a more elaborate blueprint to help us all get along. First of all, he says, the boss should never lock the thermostat. "If you do that, and a lot of people do, you're sending a bad message to the employees," Mr. Int-Hout says. "You're saying, 'We don't trust you.'" For their part, bosses should never try to pinch pennies via the thermostat. Companies pay a lot more for personnel than for energy, so keeping those workers productive is worth a larger electricity bill. The chilly folks won't like this, but Mr. Int-Hout insists cooler is better. "When you're too hot you slow down, and that affects your work," he says. "If you're cold you can add clothing, but you can't shed clothing if you're warm."

What building engineers ought to do, Mr. Int-Hout says, is be consistent. "Whatever the temperature, people need to know how to dress for the environment," he says. "When it's cold one day and hot the next, cold in the morning and hot in the afternoon, then you've got a problem. So the first goal is uniformity. Then the second goal is cooperation." That's the hard part, and here's Mr. Int-Hout's explanation: Every individual's metabolism rate is different, regardless of gender. Men, he says, tend to wear twice as much clothing as women, which amounts to a 3-degree difference in comfort levels. Moreover, he says, the three areas of the body most sensitive to temperature are the back of the neck, the back of the wrist and the ankles. "And men's ankles are insulated," he says. "We're wearing socks. Even women who wear pants often don't wear socks, and hose don't count. "If you have a lousy air distribution system, warm air rises and cold air puddles on the floor. So women are going to complain and men aren't going to notice. And if they're wearing a tie, that means their collar is tight and it'll never be too cold for them."

A well-run system should distribute air evenly, allow thermostat adjustments in specific areas and encourage people to be civil. "It behooves management to keep people as comfortable as possible," Mr. Int-Hout says. "If they bring in a heater or a fan (because they're too cold or hot), then you're paying for their energy costs twice." His idealism, unfortunately, is tempered by years of experience. "You can't fix everything," he concludes.

That brings us back to Mr. Giles, who's trying to keep about three dozen employees happy at their consulting firm. After the firm moved to new offices several years ago, he and his staff made "creative adjustments" - closing air ducts, redirecting vents, putting people where they're most comfortable. "We got it down within reason," he says. "It did take a couple of years."