



The Link

Office Cubicles Need Care – and Cleaning, Too

By Doug Berjer, Brand Manager, CFR

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Every office has them but few ever think about cleaning them.

That's the unfortunate circumstance when it comes to office partitions, often used to section off office areas into cubicles. This is because most cubicles are made of a fabric, typically nylon or olefin, that can absorb airborne impurities, dust, and contaminants that over time must be removed. If not, the appearance of the partition will gradually darken due to the soil load, and staff working near the partitions may develop allergic reactions, which not only impacts their health but overall worker productivity as well.

But how to clean them? Facility managers (FMs) should have cleaning crews regularly vacuum partitions. Even this simple step is often overlooked, but regular vacuuming helps remove a great deal of the dry soil, keeping the partitions cleaner and healthier for longer periods of time.

However, at least once if not twice per year, partitions should be cleaned using a hot-water extraction method. Before extraction can begin, administrators should notify staff about the cleaning and ask them to remove any personal items and company papers often tacked or taped to the partitions; this will expedite the cleaning procedure significantly and can reduce costs.

Necessary Equipment

The cleaning equipment necessary to clean partitions include the following:

- Extraction equipment; in most cases this will be a portable carpet extractor. It is also preferable that the extractor be a hot-water machine that heats the water/solution. The reason for this is simple: hot water improves the effectiveness of the cleaning chemicals. Partitions are cleaned more thoroughly, dry faster, and often require less chemical, a cost savings.
- Upholstery tools; hand tools specifically engineered to clean upholstery are mandatory. There can be overspray, causing water and chemical to spray onto other nearby surfaces. A properly designed upholstery tool will help minimize this.

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- A brush; a key part of any type of cleaning is agitation, and it is very important when cleaning partitions. Typically, the technician will pre-spray the partition with a cleaning agent. The brush is then used to work the agent into the fabric to help loosen and dissolve soils. This is especially true of any "high-touch" areas on the partition, such as corners or edges. Oil from fingers can darken these areas, and the brush and cleaning chemical can help remove it. However, take note: the brush must be soft with little pressure applied because it can damage the partition fibers.
- Miscellaneous items that should also be included are clean, absorbent towels and plastic coverings to protect nearby furniture

As to the extraction equipment and upholstery tools used for cleaning partitions, technicians are encouraged to select portable extractors that recycle and filter the chemical and water used. With these more advanced systems, the chemical/water can be recycled up to seven times before it must be emptied. This system speeds up the cleaning process considerably, improves worker productivity, and together can help lower the cost of cleaning partitions.

Also, look for upholstery tools that feature nozzles/wand attachments with enclosed spray jets. With these systems, 90 percent to 95 percent of the moisture generated in the cleaning process is recovered. This does two important things:

1. It allows the partition to dry much faster.
2. It protects the backing of the partition.

In many cases, partitions have a cardboard backing. Should these backings become wet, or the partition takes too long to dry, it is possible that mold will develop, which could require the partition to be replaced. A nozzle attachment with greater moisture recovery capability will help prevent this.

Other Issues, Other Concerns

Although partition cleaning is not difficult, if not performed properly there can be problems, especially if too much moisture is released into the fabric. However, other issues that FMs should be aware of include these:

- Preventing color loss or change. Always have cleaning crews pretest for colorfastness using the strongest cleaning agent in their arsenal to help prevent cleaning discoloration or loss.
- Removing ink spots. A big problem with partitions is that they often are covered with ink spots, which can be difficult to remove. A dry solvent may spread the spots; however, a gel solvent can help dissolve the ink.
- Cleaning from the bottom up. Cleaning partitions from the top down can result in cleaning chemical running down the fabric, which can cause streaking. Cleaning from the bottom up helps prevent this.

Drying and Inspection

Using an advanced nozzle/wand attachment system as referenced earlier, partitions can dry in as little as two hours. Using a more conventional system may require 24 hours or more for the partitions to dry.

Once dry, examine the partitions before allowing workers to reattach items to them. It is not uncommon for areas of the partition to be missed when cleaning. Since partition cleaning is performed only once or twice a year, making sure every area is thoroughly cleaned helps keep them cleaner and healthier longer.

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