

The ritual of choosing your next office

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Raymond Chen

The joke at Microsoft is “Don’t like your office? Don’t worry. You’ll be moved to a different one soon.” It’s not actually that bad, at least not in my experience, but the joke still stands.

When a team moves to a new building, there is the question of who gets which office. And this is one of the few things at Microsoft that is done purely by seniority: The best offices go to people who have been at Microsoft the longest.¹

Different teams manage things differently. The most free-for-all method is simply to give everybody a time slot, and at the appointed time, you come in, look at the available offices, and pick yours. Subject to constraints like, “All the people who work on the X component should be in this area of the building.”

More commonly, the manager of the team that is moving sits down and decides where everybody will get moved to, taking seniority into account, so that more senior people tend to get better offices.

I heard of one manager who augmented the standard pattern: After everybody was given their office assignments, she said, “Okay, anybody can swap offices by mutual agreement. You can make side deals if you want. If you want my office, make me an offer.”

I don’t know whether anybody tried to swap for her office, or what they offered to sweeten the deal.

¹ Of course, senior executives will pull rank and claim the best offices for themselves, using excuses like “I need an office large enough to have a meeting table,” or “My doctor says that I have to have a nice view of Mount Rainier.”

[Raymond Chen](#)

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