ing lighter walls, and made of disposable materials.

A tax change in the early 1960s aided the cubicles' cause by allowing companies to write off the cost of their components after only seven years; traditional fixed-wall offices received far less favorable tax treatment. When one of Herman Miller's rivals launched a competitive modular system, Propst's innovation got the validation it needed. The revolution was on.

In the late 1970s and '80s, big business suffered a crisis of profitability, Saval writes, and the toiling masses in the cubicles paid the price. Between 1990 and 1992 a total of 1.1 million white-collar workers were laid off, a greater number than their similarly discharged blue-collar counterparts. Workweeks became longer. Vacation days remained stuck at an average of 9 to 12 a year, compared with 30 for workers in Germany. The cubicle, conceived as a liberating innovation, became a symbol of "transience, arbitrariness, and insecurity."

The cubicle revolution also made it possible for bosses to squeeze more workers into ever smaller spaces. Between 1999 and 2006, the average cubicle shrank from 90 square feet to 75. Michael Bloomberg, the current mayor of New York, allowed just four square feet to workers in the headquarters of his media empire in 1999—to increase "collaboration."

A few tech companies began to break out of the "cube farm" trend during the dot-com boom of the 1990s. But the defectors didn't treat their workers much better. Their whimsical workplaces, with their game rooms and free food, were designed to foster creativity—and workweeks of 80 to 100 hours. It was just another iteration of the white-collar sweatshop, Saval says.

> The much-maligned office cubicle was designed to free the "ceaselessly inventive potential of the white-collar mind."

Today, cubicle refugees face grim alternatives, often working at home and paying for their own workspace as well as health care and retirement, Saval writes. Office design theorists now burble about "spaceless growth." It's foolish for white-collar workers to aspire merely to "graduate" from the cubicle to the corner office, Saval declares. The office landscape may change, but the real issues remain the same: pay, leisure time, job security, and the "autonomy that was promised, and perverted, by the cubicle."

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Secrets of the Senior Shopper

THE SOURCE: "Life-Cycle Prices and Production" by Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst, in *The American Economic Review*, Dec. 2007.

It's no secret that penny-pinching older people seem to get more for their money. Now two economists have combed through 950,000 grocery receipts to produce mathematical proof and to show how seniors do it: They spend more than an hour and a half trundling their carts along the grocery aisles every week, compared with 58 minutes for the under-30 crowd; those 65 and older shop nearly eight times a month, compared with 6.5 times for young folks, and more than two-thirds take advantage of discounts, compared with about half of the younger group.

The result: Seniors save 3.4 percent on groceries compared with the average 25-to-29-year-old, according to Mark Aguiar of the University of Rochester and Erik Hurst of the University of Chicago's business school.

The economists wondered whether the mature shoppers were producing their bargain loaves and fishes by going to more discount stores, buying cheaper products, stocking up during sales, or cutting back on eating. Their answers: no, no, no, and no.

The older shoppers' secret is clear: They shop slightly more often and considerably more intensively, cruising familiar stores, and they spend more time at home in meal preparation.

At age 49, the prices people pay for food turn down. By the time their Social Security checks tumble through the mail slot, they're saving real money. If they shop twice as often as younger people, they can cut their grocery bills by as much as seven to 10 percent. They're making an economic substitution: time for money.