Manual typewriters survive with collectors

By Sam McManis, Sacramento Bee

My, what is that clacking cacophony piercing the pleasant murmur and hum and halogen glow of the workplace?

Staccato bursts, startling as gunfire, ring out through the cubicle partitions. Now here comes a single bell chime, followed by a dissonant rrrpppttt noise, like an angry boss clearing his throat. Someone, anyone, please, make it stop.

In an office dotted with Hewlett-Packard flat screens, a lone typewriter holdover at the state's Employment Development Department hunts and pecks with impunity on a hulking, cast-iron Underwood No. 5 model, built in 1903.

"I know, I know," said Linda Shakespeare, hands hovering over the keys, "it's so loud. Imagine a whole room of these being used. Loud, but I love the sound."

Wait, you mean to say that, once upon a time in a technologically tamer world, this aural assault was routinely heard in all workplaces? Yeah, right. Maybe a construction site. How clunky and unidimensional, how very Flintstonian in this age of iPads and smartphones.

"Actually, I'd love to see more people go back to using a typewriter – maybe not all the time, just to have the experience," she said. "This machine here launched our information technology."

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